

British Provincial Dressmakers
in the
Nineteenth Century

By

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Frontispiece

Illustration from The Seamstress or the White Slave of England by G.M.W.Reynolds (1853)

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Record Offices

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Other

The Family History Centre, Glasgow University Business Records Centre, John Lewis Archive, the National Record Archive and Ulverston Heritage Centre

Conversion tables

Prices have been given throughout in pounds, shillings and pence. For people unfamiliar with pre-decimal currency:

12d (pennies) = 1s (shilling)

1s (shilling) = 5p (pence)

20s (shillings) = £1

Halfpennies (1/2d) and farthings - (1/4d, 3/4d) were legal tender throughout the 19th century. Some prices were also given in guineas

1 guinea = £1-1s = £1-5p

To convert 19th century money into its contemporary (1999) equivalent, the Central Office of Statistical Information suggests the following multipliers;

Year	1800	1820	1840	1860	1880
Multiplier	38.8	44.9	47.3	46.3	51.8

Imperial measurements - inches, feet and yards - have also been used. These were the measurements used for fabric, and people, throughout the period under review, so it would be inappropriate to convert them to metric.

12 ins (inches) = 1 ft (foot)

3 ft (feet) = 1 yd (yard)

1 inch = approximately 2.5 cms (centimetres)

1 ft = approximately 31cms

1 yard = approximately 91.5 cms

Conventions

Throughout the footnote text 'RO' = Record Office and 'Children's Employment Commission' = Royal Commission into the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Trade and Manufactures'

Full references to documents used, plus call numbers, appear in the bibliography. Footnote references include call numbers, but the titles of County Record Offices use the county names in their generally recognised short form, eg Leics., Herts., Northants..

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Sources of the illustrations

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Ewing, Elizabeth Everyday dress in England 1650-1900 (1989) - 3; Leics RO - 4, 24, 28; Walkley, Christina, The Ghost in the Looking Glass (1981) - 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, 16, 17; Manchester Art Gallery *Pre-Raphaelite Women Painters* exhibition - 11; Exeter Museums - 12; Staffordshire University - 15, 57; Russell Cotes Art Gallery - 18; Cambs RO - 19, 22, 23; Ulverston Heritage Centre - 64; Edinburgh RO - 21; Suffolk RO - 25; Keele University Library - 26; John Lewis Archive - 30, 36, 37; Durham RO - 31, 32, 33; Cheshire RO - 35; Platt Hall, Manchester - 38; Glasgow Business Records Centre - 29, 56, 61; Family Records Centre - 63; Royston Museum - 65; private collections - 49, 87 to 89; author's photographs - 20, 34, 39, 43, 44, 45, 46, 47, 55, 57, 60, 67 to 86.

BRITISH PROVINCIAL MILLINERS AND DRESSMAKERS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Introduction

'They [women] would rather work with their hands than their heads; and sewing will always be more in their way, and to their taste and turn, than science. — To ply the needle is their great delight - it seems an instinct of their nature; and a wise and benificent [sic] one it is, for it is a constant and unfailing source of amusement to them, and its usefulness every one will readily, and at once, own —' (Part of a paper read by the Rev F O Morris - Rector of Nunburnholme near York before the Social Science Congress in Newcastle in 1870)

For most of the 19th century the needle trades came second only to domestic service as the nation's largest employer of female labour¹. Of course, these trades included women who were not milliners or dressmakers - at least not in the terms of this study. They contained seamstresses, tailoresses, cap-makers and other needlewomen acting as out-workers for the ready-made clothing industry. There were stay-makers, embroideresses and purveyors of baby linen. There were 'sewing machinists' some of whom worked for dressmakers but many of whom worked in factories. Different industries created their own needle workers - in Leicester, for example, there were women who described themselves as 'seamers' who made up hosiery and machine-produced knitwear. It is not always possible, from the statistical evidence, to decide into exactly which category some of these workers fit. For the purpose of this study, however, I am looking at women who worked as 'bespoke' dressmakers and milliners, creating or altering garments and headgear for individual clients².

¹ In 1841, for example, there were 89,079 milliners and dressmakers and 17,946 seamstresses in England and Wales, as against 712,493 female domestic servants and 18,284 charwomen. The only other trade employing comparable numbers of women was cotton manufacturing, which, in all its branches, employed 115,425. By 1911 there were 333,129 dressmakers, 1,260,673 female domestic servants, 372,834 female workers in cotton manufacture - and 211,183 women teachers.

² For most of the 19th century 'dressmaking' and 'millinery' were almost interchangeable terms. Practitioners appeared in trades directories under 'M' for *'Milliners and Dressmakers'*, and not until the latter part of the century did the twentieth century definitions of milliners as makers of headgear, and dressmakers as makers of garments, come into general use. Some 19th century milliners made only caps and hats, some dressmakers made only garments, but many made both. For clarity's sake, the modern term 'dressmaker' will be used throughout, except when dealing with individuals who specifically described themselves as 'milliners' or who demonstrably made only headgear.

Aims

No author, so far, has attempted to create a coherent picture of the British dressmaking trades. However, both Ivy Pinchbeck³ and Alice Clark⁴, practitioners of 'women's history' long before the subject was officially established, recognised the importance of millinery and dressmaking as skilled trades for women '*-- among all business women the milliners ranked first in importance*'⁵. Indeed, with the possible exception of laundry work, millinery and dressmaking were the only skilled trades controlled by women. Beverley Lemire in the introduction to Dress, Culture and Commerce (1997) remarks on the absence of a study of these trades. The main purpose of my thesis, therefore, is to fill a gap in our knowledge. I aim to examine and analyse the dressmaking trade in the English provinces between 1780 and 1900 and describe the major changes that took place within it over that period. In this context 'the provinces' really means 'outside London' and will in fact include some references to Edinburgh - which is neither English nor provincial - and Wales, simply because good records exist for these places and so few records survive overall. No doubt some of the smaller London dressmakers ran businesses which were similar to those of their provincial colleagues, but no records of such firms were to be found so they have been excluded, along with court dressmakers - the only branch of the trade that has already been studied in any detail⁶.

A considerable number of dressmaking businesses left records of various sorts, and I have studied fifty sets of - hitherto mostly unpublished - records. I use these to describe the various types of dressmaking business that existed in the 19th century, to assess the training dressmakers received, their career structure and the wages they were paid at different times and in different places. I review the development of the trade and try to explain why it expanded so rapidly in the third quarter of the 19th century. I also investigate dressmakers' relationships with their clients and with their suppliers, the prices they charged and the profits they made. I evaluate the role played by dressmaking workrooms in department stores in

³ Pinchbeck, Ivy, Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850, (1930 - reprinted 1985)

⁴ Clark, Alice, Working Life of Women in the 17th Century, (1919- reprinted 1968)

⁵ Op cit, Pinchbeck, (1985 Virago edition), p.287

⁶ By Walkley, Christina, The Ghost in the Looking Glass, (1981)

the 1870s and 80s in the professionalisation of the trade, and the impact of sewing machines, paper patterns and 'scientific' methods of dressmaking. I discuss ways in which entrepreneurial women who had trained as dressmakers were able to capitalise on their skills by teaching and publishing. By studying trades directories, I demonstrate how the numbers of dressmakers expanded in the period under review. By a detailed analysis of census returns I endeavour to produce profiles of the women who worked in the trade in selected areas.

Much information about dressmakers comes from fictional sources. The generalised picture of the 19th century dressmaker as a desperately poor, overworked young woman, prone to lose her virtue in return for a square meal, is as familiar to contemporary historians as it was to the reader of Victorian novels. It is part the aim of this study to evaluate this picture in relation to the surviving evidence. I shall also analyse paintings of 'dressmakers' in the same way.

My original plan was that this study would concentrate on the dressmaking trade in Leicester. Having spent twenty-two years of my adult life as a historian living in the city, and thirteen years as curator of the costume collection at the (then) Leicestershire Museums Service, collecting and handling garments made and worn in the area, I felt this was a study I was well-placed to undertake. There is indeed no shortage of statistical and physical evidence for the dressmaking trade in Leicester, in the form of trades directories, census returns, advertisements in the local press and actual garments, and I have used these extensively. The decision to broaden the geographical scope of the topic was taken because no records of individual dressmaking businesses survive for Leicester and the study would have been much poorer without reference to such data.

My study covers a long period as well as a wide geographical area, but because so few records survive it remains manageable. While the accumulation of evidence from a range of individual firms has enabled me to create a coherent national picture of the dressmaking business, that picture shifted over time. Only by looking at the evidence over a comparatively long time span was it possible to chart the development of the profession and analyse the reasons why it expanded how and when it did, and to see how the development of the trade was affected by other changes in the social and economic climate. I have therefore defined the '19th century' in a somewhat arbitrary manner as the period between the late 18th

century and the establishment of Trade Boards at the beginning of the 20th century⁷.

Historiography

Despite the hundreds of books on the history of costume that have been published since the Cunningtons⁸ began to make the subject fashionable in the 1930s, few writers have paid any attention to the dressmaking trades. Christina Walkley's book The Ghost in the Looking Glass (1981) is the only one specifically about British dressmakers. It deals with the 'court' dressmaking trade in London, and in particular with a *cause celebre* of 1863 - the tragic death of a young dressmaker named Mary Anne Walkley - and the resultant enquiries into, and agitation for the reform of conditions in which dressmakers lived and worked. It was a ground-breaking study, but it is quite short and only deals with one type of establishment. The London court dressmaking trade was highly specialised and catered only for the upper echelons of society. It existed to dress ladies for the London 'season' and pandered to clients who expected to be able to order a dress in the morning to be worn to a function the following night. Court dressmakers were therefore notorious for working extraordinarily long hours, even before the Walkley case. The London court trade is far better documented than any other branch of dressmaking because it was the focus for so many attempts at reform. Though some provincial firms described themselves as 'court dressmakers', and provincial towns had periods when dressmakers were extra busy, there was nothing comparable to the London season.

Walkley's book relies heavily on the evidence of enquiries - that of the Children's Employment Commissions of 1843 and 1864, Dr William Ord's 1863 Report on the Sanitary Circumstances of Dressmakers and other Needlewomen in London (6th Report of the Medical Officer of the Privy Council) and the Report of the 1888 Select Commission on the Sweating System, and its Conclusions, published in 1890. She used articles based on these enquiries which were published in women's magazines and in Punch, and Mayhew's reports, as quoted by E P Thompson and Eileen Yeo in The Unknown Mayhew.

⁷ The Trade Boards Act was passed in 1909 but the board that dealt with dressmaking were not established until 1920

⁸ Charles Willett and Phyllis Cunnington were collectors of costume and their collection formed the basis of the Gallery of English Costume, in Manchester. They were the authors of numerous costume history reference books including the Handbook of English Costume series. For further information about their impact on costume studies, see Tozer, Jane, 'Cunnington's Interpretation of Dress', Costume 20 (1986) and Jarvis, Anthea, 'An Agreeable Change from Ordinary Medical Diagnosis', Costume 33 (1999)

(1971)⁹. To a lesser extent she also used portraits of fictional dressmakers depicted by Mrs Gaskell and Dickens. However, I would disagree with some of her conclusions. I believe that she is over-reliant on reports published with a reforming agenda and therefore paints an excessively gloomy picture. The subtitle of her book is The Victorian Seamstress. There was in fact a distinct hierarchy within the needle trades. 'Seamstress' today simply means someone who sews but in the 19th century it was a job title. Seamstresses assembled garments for the ready-to-wear industry; they received the pieces already cut out and were often only responsible for part of the making up. Sometimes they worked for drapers and sometimes they repaired items or made undergarments for an individual client, but they were emphatically not dressmakers nor were they usually employed by bespoke dressmakers. In fact they operated at the opposite end of the trade spectrum - a fact of which even some of their contemporaries were ignorant, as we shall see in chapter one. When she discusses '*The marked connection between needlework and prostitution ---*' (p.81) Christina Walkley continues to fall into this trap of confusing dressmakers and seamstresses, though, to be fair, she does explain that many seamstresses or 'needlewomen' were former dressmakers who had fallen on hard times.

Elizabeth Sanderson wrote a paper on the milliners of Georgian Edinburgh - 'The Edinburgh Milliners 1720-1820', Costume 20 (1986) which demonstrates that, as late as 1820, the women who went into the trade in Scotland were gentlewomen, the daughters and sisters of professional men and minor gentry. Dressmakers in Victorian England seem to have come from a very different social class.

Anthea Jarvis produced a booklet for Merseyside Museums on the dressmakers who made some of the dresses in their collections - Liverpool Fashion Its Makers and Wearers 1830-1940 (1981). Costume museums seldom have any information about the makers of the garments in their collections - at least not for items that predate the 20th century - and where any such information has survived it is not usually more than a name on a label or a price on a bill, which means little without a wider context in which to set it. Jarvis's booklet was a brave attempt to create such a context for Liverpool and she used a wide range of local evidence - trades directories, advertisements, an interview of 1887 in the local press with a 'cheap dressmaker', and descriptions from Mrs Gaskell's Mary Barton (1848). Unfortunately the resulting booklet is too slight to be of any great value.

⁹ Henry Mayhew was a journalist and writer on social conditions in the 1840s and 50s, see chapter one, pp. 54-5

Madame Clapham, Hull's Celebrated Dressmaker, (1999) by Jayne Tyler and Clare Parsons is another museum publication. It was produced to complement an exhibition of Madame Clapham's work (1887-1952) held at Wilberforce House Museum in Hull. Though it contains some interesting interviews with former employees and some detail of working practice, the majority of the material dates from the 20th century. Madame Clapham was in no way typical of provincial dressmakers - she worked for an elite clientele and numbered Queen Maud of Norway amongst her customers.

Naomi Tarrant included a chapter on dressmaking in The Development of Fashion (1994) and this contained a rudimentary history of the development of the trade. Her conclusions are essentially accurate, but they are derivative, and she does not provide any original evidence to substantiate them.

Margaret Stewart and Leslie Hunter wrote The Needle is Threaded 'The History of an Industry' in 1964 for the National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers. It purports to be a history of the garment trades from the middle ages to the present day, but is only useful when dealing with the recent history of unionisation. Even then it is unreliable as the authors do not give sources for their references and provide only the most rudimentary of indexes.

Deborah Cherry has written on the dressmaker in art - Painting Women, Victorian Women Artists (1993), pp.153-157, and 'Surveying seamstresses' in Feminist Art News, 9 (1983). She is an art historian and she investigates how women from different backgrounds were portrayed by artists at various times. Some of those women were employed in the needle trades. I have used some of her sources, but have assessed them from the point of view of accuracy of presentation, and efficacy as a form of propaganda, rather than as works of art.

Janet Arnold's Patterns of Fashion series (first published in 1964 and 1966) and Norah Waugh's The Cut of Women's Clothes (1968) include information on dressmaking techniques, sewing machines, paper patterns, pattern books and dressmaking manuals. These have proved extremely useful as a foundation for chapter five of this thesis. I have examined their sources and extended their findings. Andrew Godley's work on sewing machinery - 'Singer in Britain: The Diffusion of Sewing Machine Technology and its Impact on the Clothing Industry in the United Kingdom, 1860-1905', Textile History, 27, (1996) and 'The Development of the Clothing Industry: Technology and Fashion' Textile History, 28, (1997) - provided a useful basis for my analysis of the use of machinery within the trade, as did Frank P Godfrey's An International History of the Sewing Machine (1982)

Alison Adburgham's Shops and Shopping (1989 edition), - in particular her chapters on department stores, private dressmakers and Edwardian dressmakers; Michael Miller's Le Bon Marche, bourgeois culture and the department store (1981); the series of essays that makes up Cathedrals of Consumption 1850-1939 (edited by Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, (1999)) and Bill Lancaster's Social History of the Department Store (1998) provided background for my investigation into dressmaking workrooms in large stores, but though they all deal with the importance of department stores in the late 19th century, none of them makes more than a passing reference to the existence of dressmaking workrooms.

Since the early years of the century, various writers have dealt with seamstresses in the sweated trades - there is a wealth of information about sweating in the reports, exhibitions, books and papers generated by reformers. The most notable recent authors in this field are Duncan Bythell, The Sweated Trades (1978), James Schmiechen, Sweated Industry and Sweated Labour (1984) and Jenny Morris, Women Workers and the Sweated Trades (1986). Schmiechen is particularly clear on the progress of enquiries and legislation, and is informative about the development of tailoring, which in some ways ran parallel to that of dressmaking. Some provincial dressmakers could be regarded as sweated workers, but the majority suffered less in this way than did their colleagues in the capital.

A small booklet by 'Scissors' entitled Why Dressmaking Does not Pay (1895) is the only 19th century publication that analysed the trade from a contemporary perspective. It was produced as part of the movement to reform workplace conditions, though it is unclear exactly who the target audience was intended to be. Works like Richard Campbell's London Tradesman (1747) or the Book of Trades or Library of the Useful Arts (1811 and 1818 - stereotyped by G Sidney for Richard Phillips) include references to millinery and mantua making but are almost entirely descriptive.

British authors - with the exception of Elizabeth Sanderson - have largely ignored the records of dressmaking firms, so their writings do not provide model methodologies for the interpretation of such material. Much more has been written about the trades in America.

Probably the best synthesis of this work is Wendy Gamber's The Female Economy, the Millinery and Dressmaking Trades 1860-1930 (1997). She examines the trades on the east coast with particular reference to Boston. There were considerable differences - and considerable similarities - between the two countries. Dressmaking and millinery were the trades espoused by 42% of Boston's working women post 1860, and a further 20% were employed in other clothing trades. Milliners and dressmakers were

seen as the aristocrats of the American female labour market. Nonetheless, pulp literature on both sides of the Atlantic treated dressmakers in much the same way - as gentlefolk fallen on hard times, or as prostitutes (though American writers do not seem to have had the same reforming agenda as did British novelists). Gamber finds that most American dressmakers were actually the daughters of prosperous working class families or small tradesmen. She dismisses the notion that many dressmakers became prostitutes when times were bad - though on three separate occasions she qualifies this by saying that milliners' shops were occasionally fronts for brothels - without ever producing evidence to substantiate her claim. American dressmakers who established their own businesses were apparently older than their British counterparts (in their 30s and 40s) and almost always unmarried. Their businesses were more prosperous than British ones, but by and large lasted for shorter periods (2 ½ times less) than similar scale enterprises established by men. Apprenticeships were shorter than in the UK - three years was considered long - and by the 1840s dressmakers expected their apprentices to board out or pay for their keep. They were also less likely to charge premiums.

Pay and prices were higher in 19th century America than they were in provincial England. Ms Dodds charged between \$1 and \$2 for making a dress in 1820s Washington, while an ultra-fashionable Boston dressmaker, Olivia Flynt, charged an unbelievable \$2000 for making four dresses in the 1880s¹⁰ (p.121). The effect seems to have been that American dressmakers did not work the extraordinarily long hours that were accepted as standard in Britain. However, dressmakers who failed to pay their staff seem more numerous in the American record than in the British, and American dressmakers seem to have been less subservient and respectful than their UK counterparts.

Sewing machines affected dressmaking workshops rather earlier in America than they did in Britain; paper patterns arrived at roughly the same time and America produced even more drafting systems and gadgets for pattern cutting than we did. These seem to have been the brainchildren of male inventors rather than female entrepreneurs, and Gamber sees these developments, along with the coming of department store workrooms in the 1890s, as negative, de-skilling women and removing the autonomy of their gender within the craft. American department store workrooms seem to have concentrated on altering ready-to-wear items rather than on making from scratch, unlike British store workrooms which, at least to begin with, did both, and had a much more positive effect on the development of the trade in the UK.

¹⁰ Gamber, Wendy, The Female Economy, the Millinery and Dressmaking Trades 1860-1930 (1997), p.121

Gamber relies on many of the same types of material as have been available for this study - clients' letters, account books and diaries, dressmakers' memoirs, newspaper advertisements, dressmaking manuals, trades directories and the census. She also had available much more in the way of information about finance. The Federal censuses for 1860 and 1870 asked questions about property and wealth, and the records of R G Dun and Co '*the nation's leading credit reporting firm*' enabled her to report on the credit worthiness of a number of milliners and a few dressmakers. The Protective Committee of the Boston Women's Educational and Industrial Union intervened in legal disputes between mistress and employee or dressmaker and client, and left records that provide a view of staff and customer relations unavailable in the UK¹¹.

There are a number of American studies of the records of individual dressmaker's firms, and Gamber relied heavily on these. One of the best I have seen is Amy Simon's MA thesis (University of Delaware) She is so neat and fits so well. Garment construction and the millinery business of Eliza Oliver Dodds 1821-33 based on a day book in Winterthur Museum library. Simon's approach, especially her use of specimen garments to interpret the dressmaking process, is very similar to my own. She also included an excellent chapter on the hierarchy of needle skills, an aspect of the trade that is often misunderstood by British writers¹². Amy Simon was fortunate in having enough material to be able to analyse in considerable detail Ms Dodds' background and training, her borrowing of capital from banks and her investments in property, her staff, their wages, the range of materials she sold and their prices, her trading network and the suppliers from whom she bought stock. No British dressmaker left such detailed and complete records, though, using a range of records, I have been able to build almost as detailed a picture of trade practice in the UK.

Sources and methods

Given the small number of works dealing specifically with the dressmaking trade, I have looked further afield for methodological models. Trades' histories fall into several categories. There are histories of firms or individuals whose contribution to progress is unchallenged. These range from hagiographies - like Eliza Meteyard's two volume The Life of Josiah Wedgwood, (1865-6) - to the deeply scholarly - such as Arthur

¹¹ Ibid, pp.235-7

¹² See for example, op cit, Walkley (1981)

Raistrick's classic work on Abraham Darby of Coalbrookdale¹³. Some histories of individual firms have been written simply because records survive and some body, usually a museum or local history society, felt they were of sufficient interest to record¹⁴. These tend to be purely descriptive and make little attempt to analyse the subject in relation to trade as a whole. Others are written by descendants of the firm's founders as a form of family history¹⁵. Such works, however they treat their subjects, share the advantage of dealing with men or businesses for which much of the source material is likely to be available within the firm's or family's papers.

It is much less easy to write a history of an entire trade. A few trades - railway work, for example - are exceptionally well recorded, but most general trade histories tend to be sketchy and deal only with basic methods of work, tools, materials, locations and the dates of key inventions or discoveries. The Shire series provides numerous examples of this genre, more or less informatively written according to author¹⁶. Alternatively there are works, written by individuals who have spent a lifetime within the trade, that are so detailed as to be all but unreadable - for example, Felkin's History of Machine Hosiery (1867).

Histories dealing with common but relatively un-mechanised trades, like shoemaking, butchery, carpentry, blacksmithing - or dressmaking - offer the greatest challenge. Such trades have not thrown up heroic subjects on whom to focus; many of their participants were working on a small scale and left little written evidence behind them and their activities were so commonplace that contemporaries seldom commented on them. Where evidence does survive, it is impossible to know how typical any individual record is, which complicates attempts to trace developments and fluctuations. Nonetheless, with persistence, and reference to a wide range of sources, the historian can amass an impressive amount of information and build a coherent picture. Lateral thinking helps. In The Place of the Rural Blacksmith in Parish Life 1500-1900, (1997), for example, Marcia Evans tested literary descriptions of huge brawny blacksmiths against the actual evidence of men's heights to be found in 18th century muster rolls.

Several works provided inspirational guidance. Keith Snell's Annals of the Labouring Poor (1985) is a

¹³ Raistrick, Arthur, A Dynasty of Iron Founders. (1953)

¹⁴ For example, Tucker, M T, Vincent and Son Ltd. Cabinet Makers, Brick Lane, London (1977)

¹⁵ For example, Dudson, Audrey M, Dudson, a family of potters since 1800, (privately published 1985)

¹⁶ For example, Swann, June, Shire Album 155, Shoemaking (1986) and Bush, Sarah, Shire Album 194, The Silk Industry (1987)

series of essays, and though it deals with trades, it does not deal with any specific one. Nonetheless, I found it a particularly useful methodological model, partly because of its use of an enormously wide range of sources, partly because of its use of quantitative method and partly because of its analytical use of 'literary and attitudinal' material¹⁷. Judith Coffin's study of the Paris garment trades combines political, social and cultural history with a wealth of supporting detail and a useful re-interpretation of the aftermath of the industrial revolution¹⁸. Schmiechen's work similarly redefines the effects of industrialisation in ways that are relevant to my study¹⁹. Leora Auslander's Taste and Power, furnishing modern France (1996) examined the meanings of objects to their makers, sellers, buyers and to arbiters of taste, and traced how these changed over time. All these works, in their various ways, influenced my approach to my subject.

My most important sources have been the records of dressmaking firms and department stores. To locate these, I first used the records at the National Records Archive (NRA)²⁰. It became clear that the holdings of a number of record offices and libraries did not appear on the NRA indices, so I wrote to many institutions individually. Because so few records survived overall, I then examined all the records of dressmaking firms that I found, and records of most of the department stores which did dressmaking.

A few of the records I studied have been used by other writers - Alison Adburgham, for example, used the records of Bainbridges of Newcastle and Kendal Milne and Faulkner of Manchester in Shops and Shopping 1800-1914 (1989). Michael Moss and Alison Turton used the House of Fraser records, which they had catalogued for the University of Glasgow Business Studies Centre, as the basis for their book A Legend of Retailing - The House of Fraser (1989). Elizabeth Sanderson used the sederunt books relating to the McCleod sisters and Agnes Dow²¹. But the majority of the business papers I have used have not been published before in any form.

¹⁷ Cover review of paper back edition (1995)

¹⁸ Coffin, Judith, The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750-1915, (1996)

¹⁹ Op cit, Schmiechen (1984)

²⁰ National Records Archive, Quality House, Quality Court, Chancery Lane, London

²¹ The name given in Scotland to the books kept by the Sequestrator (known as the Receiver in England). These incorporated inventories, and the firms' books were usually kept with them. Scottish bankruptcy law required that these records be retained by the court.

The survival of these business records is patchy and inconsistent. Of the fifty sets examined in depth, twenty-three provided enough evidence to make detailed analyses of turnover and work load over a period of one or more years. The remainder provided snapshots of particular aspects of the trade. There were letters from clients to their dressmakers - including several year's worth to Mrs Pattinson of Ulverston from a Mrs Fenton who must have been the client from hell²²! There were apprenticeship indentures, letters of application and employer's references for their staff '*Good dressmaker, bad tempered, disagreeable, bad health, vindictive and generally speaking, a damn nuisance to everybody*' wrote W. E. White of Ipswich of the departing Miss Vaughan in 1887²³. Morris and Co of Barmouth left a series of order forms showing how their dressmaking department requisitioned goods from the rest of the store²⁴. Elizabeth Chaffard, retired because of ill health and living in Brighton, kept all the letters from her sister and erstwhile partner in Edinburgh, gossiping about her clients and describing the dresses she had made for them, and also the letters sent to her by her late husband, a commercial traveller. He was Belgian, and he and his relatives wrote to Elizabeth (who had been apprenticed as a teenager and whose schooling cannot therefore have been extensive) in French²⁵.

Many dressmakers appear in the records only because things went wrong, as, for instance, when Mrs Payne of Sherborne got into difficulties with a London button supplier²⁶. More often, legal records relate to bankruptcies; the Edinburgh sederunt books and the papers from the Debtors' Court in York are the main sources I have used. Interestingly, in nearly every case it was possible to work out exactly why the bankruptcies had occurred - late payments by clients in the case of Magdalene Dunbar in Leith²⁷, over-reliance on clients who insisted on providing their own fabric (thus losing any profit in purchasing fabric

²² Cumbria R O BDB38

²³ Suffolk R O [White's of Ipswich]

²⁴ National Library of Wales [ref. Morris] Further papers from this collection are in Merioneth RO, (M/824)

²⁵ National Library of Scotland MS9685

²⁶ Dorset RO D148/25/43

²⁷ Edinburgh RO CS96/3562

at a discount), in the case of Mary Kemp of York, for example²⁸. Some records were rudimentary - Mrs Pattinson of Ulverston kept her monthly profit and loss account as two columns of figures, scribbled in pencil, on the back of a calendar²⁹.

The 19th century saw a population explosion - between 1801 and 1901 the population almost trebled. As the century progressed, more and more of these people had disposable income and wanted to be seen as 'respectable'. I have used trades directories and census returns to quantify the effect this had on the dressmaking trades.

While most of this statistical evidence relates to Leicester, I have used the same type of source material, census returns and directories, to produce comparative studies of three smaller places. An analysis of these appears in chapter seven. The places I chose were Sidmouth in Devon, a highly fashionable watering place by the early 1800's, Ulverston in Cumbria³⁰, isolated, rural and old fashioned, and Melton Mowbray, a market town in the hinterland of Leicester, which for part of each year was visited by wealthy members of the hunting fraternity. The selection of these places was essentially random, but the choice of such small places was dictated by the amount of time it takes to collect census data. There was simply no time to collect evidence for another large town, though such a survey would be extremely useful for comparative purposes in the future.

Trades directories nationwide show that the numbers of women employed in the dressmaking trade increased enormously as the century progressed. In Leicester, for example, a population of 14-15,000 in 1791 supported 6+ dressmakers - or 1 per 1000 women (assuming that roughly 50% of the population was female)³¹. In 1841 there were 54 dressmakers for 40,000 people or 1 per 400 females. By 1881 a population of just over 122,000 contained over 210 dressmakers, or 1 per 290 of the female population.

²⁸ N.Yorks RO Acc.203A (F section) Nicholson

²⁹ Cumbria RO BDB38

³⁰ Ulverston is in the Furness district which was part of Lancashire until 1974

³¹ Some allowance has to be made for under-representation when dealing with the earliest directories. These were produced as commercial ventures and firms had to pay to be included. It took time for tradespeople to realise the value of inclusion.

In this context 'dressmaker' means the proprietor of a business; census evidence shows that the numbers of individuals employed in the trade was much greater.

Census evidence has also been used to produce a detailed profile of the women employed as dressmakers - age, marital status, numbers with children and social status as defined by the job done by the male head of their household, where there was one. To amass this evidence, I worked systematically through the census returns for the places studied and recorded each entry for dressmakers and milliners. These entries were then analysed to create the various statistics. They were also used to provide actual examples of the different types of household in which dressmakers lived. It does seem that in all four places, the picture of the young, impoverished dressmaker, eking out her existence in a rented room after being ruined by some heartless seducer, is largely inaccurate. The majority of dressmakers lived in families - birth or marital - many were far from young, few seem to have had illegitimate children, and very few indeed appeared in the records of prison, workhouse or lunatic asylum. And it would seem that, as the century progressed, the trade began to attract a more respectable class of girl - here defined as girls whose fathers or husbands were craftsmen and small tradesmen rather than unskilled workers.

All census evidence has to be treated with caution and it has inherent disadvantages. A surprisingly large percentage of returns are illegible in whole or in part, either because the originals have deteriorated or because they have been badly microfilmed, so no survey can be absolutely complete. For instance, the 1841 returns for Melton Mowbray were virtually unusable, as out of seven enumeration districts, five were completely illegible and the remaining two were almost too faint to read. More details of the way I used this material, its limitations, and the conclusions I reached, appear in chapter seven.

Another key source of information about the trade is government reports, though most of these concentrated on abuses in the London trade. These were largely irrelevant to this study, so the main government source I have used has been the Report on Children and Young Persons in Trades and Manufactures (Children's Employment Commission Report) 1843 (Volume X) and 1864 (Volume XIV). The commissioners interviewed dressmakers and their apprentices and other people like doctors and lodging house keepers who could give them additional information about girls in the dressmaking trade. In 1841-2 they visited London, Bristol, Bath, Norwich, Birmingham, Leamington, Nottingham, Leicester and Derby. In 1861-3 they gathered an even wider range of data from over 200 respondents in London, Birmingham, Cheltenham, Leamington, Bristol and Clifton, Bath, Exeter, Torquay, Plymouth, Portsea, Ryde, Brighton, Hastings, Dover, Swansea, Southampton, Andover, Manchester, Sheffield, Rotherham,

Barnsley, Doncaster, Liverpool, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Perth, Dublin, Londonderry, Cork, Limerick, Belfast and Dromore.

A number of former dressmakers wrote memoirs and these first hand accounts are invaluable. Their experiences were obviously very diverse. Mrs Downer of Chichester clearly loved her work and became friends with her clients³². She described in loving detail dresses she had particularly enjoyed making - a true craftswoman who took pride in her own skill and loved the material she worked on. Minnie Frisby of Bromsgrove, apprenticed c.1890, gave the lie to the idea that all young dressmakers were downtrodden. She and her fellow workers would roll back the carpet in their employer's living room and play the piano and dance whenever 'Mrs R' went to the wholesalers. They spent some of their employer's time working on dresses for themselves and vied with each other to be '*belle of the (local) ball*'³³. Clearly these were not young women who were too exhausted by hours of toil to have any time to enjoy themselves. Hannah Mitchell, on the other hand, working for a series of employers in Glossop, a serious young woman who later became a dedicated Labour Party worker, was an exceptionally fast and capable seamstress, but bitterly resented the long hours she worked. She recalled how jealous she was of the local mill girls who knew exactly when their working day would end, and how weary she was after sitting up late at night to finish dresses ordered for the local Whit Walks (when girls and women traditionally had new clothes so a busy time for Glossop's dressmakers) so that she could not herself enjoy the procession³⁴.

One memoir took the form of an oral history tape of an interview with Mrs Stent of Chichester³⁵. She was interviewed by a member of the West Sussex Record Office staff in 1972 and was then ninety-five. She had been apprenticed to a dressmaker c.1890, and talked a little about her experiences, but her interviewer was much less interested in her working life than he was in her memories of Chichester around the time of the First World War, so it was a frustrating source to use. I have not been able to use oral history to any extent because the period I am studying is beyond living memory, though I have been able to talk to

³² W Sussex RO Add Ms 18805

³³ Brunel University Library, un-numbered mss commissioned by Professor John Burnet in the 1960s

³⁴ Mitchell, Hannah, The Hard Way Up. (1977) p.70

³⁵ W Sussex RO Oral History Tape 1

descendants of dressmakers and have used occasional second hand memories. Such sources present even more potential problems than does first hand oral history, and, regretfully, I have omitted many of the things I have been told because I consider them to be of dubious authenticity.

Other information came from dressmakers' clients, particularly from their diaries and memoirs. Some recorded tradeswomen who were less than deferential. Sarah Thomas was a pious young woman in her late thirties whose late father had been a Baptist minister. When in 1862 she agreed to marry Captain Millbourne she ordered her wedding dress from Miss Truman in Cirencester. On August 19th she reported that Miss Truman

'--- spoke so slightly of the dresses, said they were coarse. We felt so vexed especially as she fitted me nearly a week ago and has not put a stitch to any one of them yet'

After a 'lecture' from Sarah, Miss Truman admitted that the problem was that she had not had the ordering of the fabrics, and the shop had *'put such an enormous profit on them'*, but though she completed the dresses and fitted them on the 25th *'She --- as good as told me that Miss Lane's were better and prettier than mine'* wrote Sarah sadly³⁶.

Susanna Ingleby, a middle aged Staffordshire gentlewoman acting as housekeeper to her widowed elder brother and his young son, has left us a detailed record of her expenditure on dress and her patronage of at least fourteen dressmakers over a period of twenty four years (1862-86), including Mrs Dinsdale who was based in London but who ran a sort of mail-order service, sending her clothes by train³⁷. Eliza Spurrett in Leicester recorded her expenditure as a teenage girl in the early 1800's - one or two dresses a year and lots of ribbons and laces to change their appearance³⁸. Lady Langham in Northampton kept a detailed record of her expenditure over the last years of her life (1845-1855)³⁹, as did Anna Morrell in York for

³⁶ Lewis, June, Diary of Sarah Thomas 1860-1865, (1994), p.143

³⁷ Personal account book of Mrs Susanna Ingleby, 1862-1885, private collection. See Appendix two.

³⁸ Leics RO 7054/1-2 - the diaries and memoirs of Eliza Spurrett

³⁹ Northants RO L(C)505

(1851-1872)⁴⁰. There must be many other account books in existence which would repay detailed study and analysis, but time and space limited this particular survey to these four⁴¹. I have contrasted the real expenditure of these individuals with the expenditure recommended by contemporary fashion writers, especially 'Sylvia' who wrote How to Dress Well on a Shilling a Day (1876), and Myra, of Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion which began in February 1887 and appeared monthly.

Advertisements in newspapers⁴², coupled with information from surviving fliers and circulars, proved a useful source of information about how dressmakers contacted clients and kept them abreast of new developments in fashion⁴³. Many dressmakers travelled extensively to glean samples and information. As early as 1778, Boswell was horrified to find himself sharing the coach from London to Edinburgh with a garrulous milliner from Lincoln who kept her female fellow travellers happily entertained with details of her recent trip to London⁴⁴. The arrival of London fashions caused a stir in provincial English towns as they did, fictionally, in Cranford in the 1830s⁴⁵. Displays, probably of fashion plates and accessories like hats and gloves, were advertised at set times and dates. Some tradeswomen took out advertisements in the local press; a scrap book of priced cuttings in the Northampton record office tells us exactly what one local firm paid to the local paper⁴⁶. Others relied on posters, others, like Trollope's Brown, Jones and

⁴⁰ N Yorks RO 69/3/15

⁴¹ See appendices one and two

⁴² I have used mainly Leicester newspapers - the Leicester Chronicle (1827-64), Leicester Daily Post (1872-1921), Leicester Evening News (1875-8), Leicester Herald and General Advertiser (1828-42), Leicester Journal (1787-1920), Leicester Mercury (1836-64), Leicester News (1857 and 1861-2) and the Midland Counties Illuminator (1841).

⁴³ There are examples of fliers in Leics RO and W.Sussex RO - see chapter 2, pp.108-9 and chapter 4, p.180 for more detail.

⁴⁴ Boswell, James, In Extremis 1776-1778 (1971) quoted by Buck, Anne in Dress in 18th Century England, (1979) pp.172-3

⁴⁵ Gaskell, Mrs, Cranford, published in 1853 but set in the 1830s

⁴⁶ Northants RO ZA6668, Shepherd and Manning papers

Robinson no doubt paid errand boys to deliver fliers to their regular customers⁴⁷. Folded fliers, un-stamped, so presumably hand-delivered, survive in the record office in Chichester⁴⁸.

Important changes began to take place in the dressmaking trade in the second half of the 19th century. From c.1860 department stores established dressmaking departments. Department store records are more numerous than records for individual firms. Large stores needed better records than small businesses, and they survive in quantity because many such stores were taken over in the middle years of this century by large chains. Two of these, John Lewis and House of Fraser, maintain their own archives, and I have had access to both of these. It seems that some stores specialised in millinery, some in tailoring, some in dressmaking, some in upholstery, and some of the larger ones, Bainbridges of Newcastle (now part of the John Lewis group) for instance, did all of these and much else besides⁴⁹. While dressmaking departments continued to be run by women, the stores themselves were nearly all male owned and run; women working there began to lose some of their autonomy within the trade. Not that private firms disappeared, many such firms still exist, but in the provinces at least, department store workshops came to be the place to go for a professional training. Hilda Winstanley in Margaret Penn's Manchester 14 Miles (published in 1947 but set in the 1890s) illustrates this clearly. Hilda began her career skivvying for a village dressmaker who used her as a sort of maid-of-all-work. Eventually her grandmother took her to be apprenticed to a prestigious firm, '*Hankinson and Sankey*', in St Ann's Square in Manchester. Madame Clapham, Hull's most prestigious dressmaker, trained in the department store workroom of Marshall and Snelgrove in Scarborough in the 1880s⁵⁰.

From c.1870 the trade also, gradually, and perhaps as the result of increased male participation, became more professional. Trade journals - The Milliners', Dressmakers' and Warehousemans' Gazette (1870-80)

⁴⁷ Trollope, Anthony, The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson, (1870)

⁴⁸ W.Sussex RO Walters papers, folder 38303-38312

⁴⁹ John Lewis Archive 265/13. According to an article about the firm in the Newcastle Daily Journal of June 23rd, 1885, Bainbridges was established in 1841. By 1885 the firm had 2-300 people employed in workrooms for upholstery, French polishing, carpet making, mattress making, dress, costume and mantle making, machine hose manufacturing, tailoring, pit flannel manufacturing, bonnet making and carpet beating by machinery. The firm also had factories in Leeds that made shirts and other clothing. A further history of the firm was written and published privately - Avery, Angela and John, The Bainbridges of Newcastle, a family history (1979)

⁵⁰ Tyler, Jayne and Parsons, Clare, Madame Clapham, Hull's Celebrated Dressmaker, (1999), p.3

which became The Milliner, Dressmaker and Draper (1881-) and The Drapers' and Milliners' Gazette of Fashion (1871-) - were established ⁵¹. A whole area of London, around Wood Street in Cheapside, came to specialise in providing services and goods for dressmakers. Paper patterns became available commercially on a large scale, as did dressmakers' dummies, kilting and button-holing machines and a whole range of more-or-less useful items like press studs and dress protectors, pocket cages and self closing tapes. Clements and Newling in Wood Street even produced a specialist range of stationery for '*Drapers, Dressmakers and Milliners*'. Firms provided postal services for tasks like pleating and buttonhole making, as well as pattern-cutting and adaptation, aimed ostensibly at the home dressmaker, but coming at a time when dresses were more complex than ever before and increasingly beyond the capability of all but the most gifted amateur. Advertisements, articles and fashion plates in women's magazines were the main source of information about these developments⁵².

Dressmakers and milliners appear as the heroines of a surprising number of 18th and 19th century novels and plays. A search through the British Library catalogue on those two keywords produced dozens of entries. Fictional sources are not necessarily reliable and not all works about dressmaker heroines describe their trade. I have, however, selected fourteen examples which I believe to be useful in one way or another. These include Mrs Gaskell's Ruth (1853) which is well known, but the others are all obscure works of little literary merit that have not previously been studied. Some of them are interesting because of the way they created, or perpetuated, stereotypes; others were deliberately written as propaganda to highlight abuses in the trade; of these some presented a reasonably accurate picture, others were unbelievably pious or wildly improbable.

A number of 19th century artists painted pictures of seamstresses and dressmakers, part of a genre of sanitised and sentimental depictions of working people that became popular in the mid 19th century. Some were actually painted as propaganda for improving conditions. The apparent realism of such works can be misleading and some of my examples will, like their literary counterparts, be used to show how paintings have helped to perpetuate myths and stereotypes about the needle trades.

⁵¹ Sadly, the British Library holdings of the first two journals were destroyed in World War II. The National Art Library has four issues of the former but I have been unable to locate any copies of the latter.

⁵² The Dressmaker and Milliner's Gazette, Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, Girl's Own Paper, Home Notes, and Marie Schild's Gazette of Fashion, for example.

Finally, I examined actual costumes - the surviving products of long forgotten dressmakers - and the machinery they used. I have been fortunate to be able to use the costume collection in Wygston's House Museum in Leicester (one of the collections I used to curate) for the purpose of this study. Leicester has one of the largest collections of dress in the provinces. Any museum costume collection is, in effect, a random sample of garments, and I have used Leicester's sample to assess the impact of sewing, buttonholing and kilting machines (chapter five) and to analyse the way in which the shape of garments and the techniques of making them changed over the period under review (chapter six) in an attempt to understand the skills dressmakers would have had to learn and develop in the course of their working lives. I used the textile machinery collection at the Science Museum in London to further my understanding of the impact machinery had on the trade, and of its limitations.

Furthermore, I am a competent dressmaker in my own right. I have been making garments for myself for nearly forty years and have experience of making both museum replicas and stage costumes. While clearly it is not always feasible for researchers to obtain the craft skills they wish to document, first hand knowledge of one's subject does add an extra dimension of understanding. This was particularly apparent when I came to evaluate the dressmaking manuals discussed in chapter five.

But first it is necessary to have some idea of the early history of the dressmaking trade and of the circumstances in which it developed.

Background to the trade

The 18th century saw an immense growth in the retailing industry. This is discussed most usefully in McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb's The Birth of a Consumer Society, the Commercialization of 18th Century England (1982), which describes how new manufacturers developed mass markets for their goods, how new methods of advertising and selling were devised and how buyers were manipulated into buying goods they had never previously realised they wanted. The final decade of the century was also a time of inflation brought about by bad harvests in the 1780s, rapid industrialisation in Britain, revolution in France and the subsequent European conflicts. Between 1790 and 1816 prices rose to an unprecedented degree.

Nonetheless, social and economic circumstances were favourable to the growth of a luxury trade. By the late 18th century more families than ever before had disposable income, and there was a whole new class of people who wanted to establish themselves in society and show off their new-made wealth. It was

becoming relatively easy to move goods around the country on the canals and new turnpike roads, so national markets could develop. Most importantly of all, a number of skilled entrepreneurs - men like Josiah Wedgwood, Matthew Boulton and George Packwood - showed how to capture and control the developing consumer market. Shopping, by the mid 18th century, had come to be seen as a pastime as much as a necessity. It was as important to be seen in the great new shops and showrooms as it was to be seen at the theatre or at the opera. It was also becoming an essentially feminine pastime⁵³. Mui and Mui estimate that clothing shops accounted for around a third of the total number of shops in London, Bristol, Norwich and Manchester in 1783-4. The percentage had fallen in each case by 1822-3, but nonetheless made up well over a quarter of the total⁵⁴. No doubt the picture was similar in most provincial centres. The growth of the dressmaking trade was thus very much a part of the consumer revolution and of the contemporary passion for new clothes

A number of authorities argue that until the late 17th century the making of women's clothes was the prerogative of tailors⁵⁵. There is evidence to suggest that this was indeed sometimes the case, but there is little documentation - for example, in the form of bills or receipts from tailors for women's garments - so it is unclear what percentage of tailors' work was for women⁵⁶. However, Alice Clark in The Working Life of Women in the 17th Century (1968 edition) describes millinery and mantua making, as already being '*skilled women's trades*'⁵⁷.

⁵³ For a more detailed discussion of this concept, see de Grazia, Victoria [ed], The Sex of Things, (1996), Part 1, Chapter 1

⁵⁴ Mui, H and Mui, L, Shops and Shopkeeping in 18th Century England, (1989) pp.67-8. The actual percentages for 1783-4 were - London 35.3%, Bristol 32.7%, Norwich 31.6% and Manchester 44.8%. In 1822-3 they were 27.4%, 29%, 30.9% and 30% respectively.

⁵⁵ For example, Buck, Anne, Dress in 18th century England (1979); Ewing, Elizabeth, Everyday Dress 1650-1900 (1989); Tarrant, Naomi, The Development of Costume (1994)

⁵⁶ For example, Sarah Fell of Swarthmore Hall near Ulverston made various payments to Matthew ffell, tailor, for the making of clothes for herself, her mother and sisters. See Penney, Norman (ed), The Household Account Book of Sarah Fell of Swarthmore Hall (1920). The accounts of the Willoughby family of Leyhill in Devon include payments to tailors for mourning dress in 1602 and for gowns for Anne Willoughby in 1604 and for Bridget Willoughby in 1608. See Gray, Todd, Devon Household Accounts Part I (1995)

⁵⁷ Op cit, Clark, p. 195

Until the late 17th century, women had comparatively small wardrobes, as evidenced by surviving inventories. Anne, Viscountess Dorchester of Gosfield Hall, Essex died in 1638. She had 4 waistcoat-and-petticoat sets, 4 decorative 'petticoats', one '*azure colloured plush coate laid with silver loome lace*', one '*safeguard of wrought satten trym'd with buttons and loopes of silver*' and one '*paire damaske bodies*' (valued together at £23-2s-8d) and a cupboard full of linen, aprons, stockings and gloves. She was a rich woman who owned over £1,400 worth of jewellery and £1,200 worth of plate yet she owned just eight outfits⁵⁸.

No doubt many women's garments were made at home or by maidservants in their employ - in the household of Sir William Petre at Ingatestone Hall in the 16th century, for example '*The maids --- made the ordinary clothes for the family as well as their own*'⁵⁹. Fabrics were robust and garments could withstand frequent re-makes and alterations. Seamstresses made shirts and under-garments for men and also worked for better off women⁶⁰. For example, Rachel, Countess of Bath made payments to '*Miss Watson the band woman*' on May 13th 1648 and on May 15th 1649 for making and mending handkerchiefs, cuffs, cravats and other linen. Nonetheless, she had her gowns made by her tailors, John Hamlin, Mr Blake and William Beare⁶¹. Much more work needs to be done to illuminate this area of costume history, but it is largely outside the scope of this study. What is important here is that the 19th century dressmaking trade was a relatively recent one. There had been no mediaeval guild specifically related to the supply of women's clothes, and whether or not the trade that emerged in the late 17th or early 18th century was largely new because demand had increased (as I suspect), or a takeover by women

⁵⁸ Steer, Francis W, 'The Inventory of Anne, Viscountess Dorchester' in Notes and Queries, October 1953

⁵⁹ Emmison, F G, Tudor Secretary. Sir William Petre at court and at home, (1961), an analysis based on the Petre family papers in Essex Record Office, which include the household account books, p.155

⁶⁰ See for example, Wardle, Patricia '*Divers necessities for His Majesty's use and service*. Seamstresses to the Stuart Kings', Costume 31 (1997)

⁶¹ Gray, Todd, Devon Household Accounts 1627-59. Part II (1996) pp 267, 277, 278, 291, 292

of a job previously done by men, is academic⁶². The key thing is that it was an activity unhampered by tradition or archaic trade restrictions and it was therefore largely outside the control of men⁶³.

Into the middle of the 18th century some women's clothes were still made by men. Elizabeth Jervis, wife of Swynfen Jervis of Meaford Hall in Staffordshire, for instance, had a scarlet tabby gown for £6-9s in 1748 from Mr Halsey. But most of the dresses she records in her account books were made by women - Mrs Moore, Mrs Fletcher and Mrs Rushton⁶⁴. Throughout the 19th century tailors retained their monopoly of making riding habits, but most other branches of women's clothing became the preserve of women. (Plates 1, 3 and 4)

Dressmakers, known as mantua makers, existed in considerable numbers by the mid 18th century, and it was from their trade and its sister occupation, millinery, that the dressmakers of the 19th century emerged. The wardrobes of 18th century women seem small to us today. Even so august a personage as Mary Churchill, wife of the Duke of Montagu, one of the wealthiest men in the country with an estimated annual income of £28,000, had only 27 gowns, 2 suits, 6 '*habits*' and about 10 mix-and-match outfits consisting of jackets or waistcoats and petticoats. Her other clothing consisted of underwear, outerwear, hats, shoes and other accessories, and masses of aprons, sleeves, frills, tippets, hoods, caps and other items to alter the appearance of her basic outfits⁶⁵.

In late 18th century France, the arbiters of fashion became the '*marchandes des modes*', the chief of whom was the hated Rose Bertin who dressed Marie Antoinette. Their trade was not officially recognised until the 1770s but within a decade, the '*marchandes*' dictated fashion to France, and, indirectly, to most

⁶² In France in 1675 Louis XIV created a dressmaker's guild '*les Maitresses Couturieres*' - see *L'Art de la Couturier*, quoted in Arnold, Janet, *Patterns of Fashion 1660-1860* (1964) p.5. No similar guild existed in Britain.

⁶³ See Lemire, Beverley *Dress, Culture and Commerce*, (1997), Chapter 2, for a fuller discussion of the clothing trade in the immediately pre-industrial period - the decline of the clothing guilds, the development of a ready-to-wear market and '*the massive use of low paid female labour and the shift from guild controlled workshops*', p.43.

⁶⁴ Hayden, Peter, 'Records of Clothing Expenditure for the Years 1746-79 Kept by Elizabeth Jervis of Meaford in Staffordshire', *Costume* 22 (1998)

⁶⁵ Llewellyn, Sacha, 'Inventory of her Grace's Things 1747 ---', *Costume* 31 (1997)

of Europe. London had long looked to Paris for information about clothes. Fashionable ladies in early 18th century London wore dresses that imitated those worn at the French court. With the Revolution in France, as Leora Auslander has shown, goods - in our case, clothes - ceased to be symbols of status and became a means of personal expression in a new, and much more mobile, society⁶⁶. Britain had freed herself of her version of an 'ancien regime' rather earlier than did her continental neighbour. Historians might disagree as to the exact date, but certainly the industrial revolution and the urbanisation of the country in the second half of the 18th century, created an equally fluid social climate. English milliners did not quite have the status of the French 'marchandes' but already by 1747 they supplied many of the same goods and services:

*'The Milliner furnishes them with Holland, Cambrick, Lawn, and Lace of all sorts, and makes these Materials into Smocks, Aprons, Tippetts, Handkerchiefs, Neckties, Ruffles, Mobs, Caps, Dressed Heads, with as many Etceteras as would reach from Charing Cross to the Royal Exchange. They make up Cloaks, Manteels, Mantelets, Chens and Capucheens, of Silk, Velvet, plain or brocaded, and trim them with Silver and Gold Lace, or Black Lace. They make up and sell Hats, Hoods, and Caps of all Sorts and Materials; they find them in Gloves, Muffs, and Ribbons; they sell quilted Petticoats, and Hoops of all Sizes, etc., and lastly some of them deal in Habits for Riding, and Dresses for the Masquerade.'*⁶⁷

France continued to be the arbiter of fashion throughout the 19th century. Most provincial dressmakers travelled to London at least once a year to see the latest modes, and those who could afford to and who were brave enough, went to Paris. Mrs Carmichael of Edinburgh, for example, was in Paris in 1866⁶⁸. Such journeys were more common than one might suppose - if dressmakers' advertisements are to be believed. The World of Fashion of April 1837 carried a 'letter' from Mr Smith of St Paul's Churchyard in London who also had an establishment on Boulevard des Italiens, Paris, describing the new season's outfits. The London branch of his firm imported French, Swiss and Italian goods. Dressmakers like the fictional Mrs Morterson had every assistance to deceive their clients⁶⁹. (Plate 2)

⁶⁶ 'This distinction between the prerevolutionary use of objects to occupy position and their postrevolutionary use to invent the individual and the social group --' Auslander, Leora, Taste and Power, furnishing modern France, (1996), p.61

⁶⁷ Campbell, Richard, London Tradesman, (1747 - reprinted 1969), p.207

See chapter two, pp. 96-7

⁶⁸ See chapter two, p.97

⁶⁹ See chapter one, pp. 42-5

The importance of clothing as a social signifier has long been recognised - sumptuary laws have dictated at various times that, for example, the width of the purple border on a Roman senator's toga be wider than that on a knight's, or that velvet and silk embroidery could not be worn by any Elizabethan lady of lower social status than a knight's wife. No sumptuary legislation was enacted in England after 1604 but the need to create rules of dress that excluded the social climber did not go away; indeed in the climate of social mobility created by the industrial revolution such rules became ever more desirable. Foreign visitors throughout the 18th century commented on the fashionable dress of ordinary English women and the supposed impossibility of distinguishing mistress from maid. Novels - Pamela (1740), Clarissa Harlow (1748), Humphrey Clinker (1770), Vanity Fair (1847-8 but depicting the Napoleonic war period) - played on the fact that dress defined social status. In the 19th century people, especially matrons, were to expend much energy on establishing unwritten rules of dress and etiquette by which outsiders could be excluded.

The pace of change in fashion accelerated in the second half of the century. In 1700, people in outlying parts of the British Isles dressed in clothes that were decades out of date by London standards. In the 1750s it took several months for new styles to percolate through to these areas. By the end of the century, with the greater ease of travel and the development of new ways of shopping, of fashion magazines, fashion plates and of the English 'fashion doll' (cut out paper figures with cut out paper outfits), it took only a few weeks. There was a new fashion every year, whereas a century earlier they had come round approximately once a decade ⁷⁰.

For all of the period under review, the fashionable shape of garments was rigidly dictated. If a novelist or diarist in 1780, or 1820, or 1860 wrote of '*a black silk dress*', for example, contemporaries would have had a very clear idea of what it would have looked like. Black silk dresses would have been very different in each of those periods, but in any one of them, all black silk dresses would have been very similar. There would have been no real variation in the shape of bodice, sleeve or skirt; trimming and detailing alone would have provided variety. It is not the purpose of this study to describe the styles of garments made and worn in the period under review - numerous books exist which do that. However, chapter six illustrates the major changes in women's fashion, 1780-1910, using items in Leicester Museum's collection, with notes about the problems they posed for their makers.

⁷⁰ For a fuller discussion of this see 'The Commercialization of Fashion' in op cit, McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb (1982) pp.34-100

Only the very old or the very eccentric dared disobey the dictates of fashion. The 'ladies of Llangollen' (1778-1831) defied convention in more than their dress, but one of them was very wealthy, and they were both renowned for their contacts and their conversation⁷¹. In Leicester, Mary Linwood, immortalised by Dickens and admired by Queen Victoria, nonetheless was seen as a figure of fun when she appeared at social occasions, a very old lady, wearing a wax neck and a jet black wig⁷². In Exeter, two famously eccentric sisters, known as 'the Alphington ponies' from the riding jackets they always wore, were lampooned in a pottery figure that was made of them in the mid 19th century⁷³. For more ordinary people, the penalty for non-conformity would have been social exclusion. Clothes that adhered to the newest fashion, therefore, were essential for anyone with any pretensions to respectability. There was always plenty of work for the maker of clothes.

However, most fabrics were of far better quality than anything we have worn in the second half of the twentieth century. Garments could be altered, re-made and passed through the hands of many different wearers before they finally wore out. In the 18th century it was common practice for garments to be bequeathed by will - even in respectable households. Parson Woodforde's niece, Nancy, famously wore dresses inherited from 'Aunt Parr'⁷⁴. They were duly re-made in contemporary style and Nancy saw no shame in wearing them. Beverley Lemire makes the point that dress in pre- and early industrial times was used almost as a form of currency. It could be exchanged for a horse, a square meal, or a night's lodging - or, indeed, for garments that better fitted or suited the wearer⁷⁵.

⁷¹ See Mavor, Elizabeth, The Ladies of Llangollen. A Study in Romantic Friendship, (1971)

⁷² See Kirby, Mary, Leaflets from My Life, (1887) pp.38-9. Mary Kirby and her sister were part-time pupils at Miss Linwood's school in Leicester. She remembers seeing Miss Linwood in her workroom. She was '*very dignified and of a great age, and wore two pairs of spectacles at a time*'. The event at which the old lady wore '*a wig of jet black curls, and a neck of wax, slightly concealed by nets and ribbons and laces*' was a display of dancing by the school's pupils at the Leicester Assembly Rooms. Miss Linwood died, aged 90, in 1845, so these memories probably date from c.1840, though Ms Kirby is not specific about dates.

⁷³ Exeter Museums, acc no 79/1997

⁷⁴ Parson Woodforde's Diary, quoted in op cit, Buck, (1979) pp.172-3

⁷⁵ Op cit, Lemire (1997) pp.1-2

Museum collections are full of garments that have been re-made several times, and surviving dressmakers' accounts show that a considerable proportion of their work derived from alterations and re-makes. In a respectable 19th century household, cast-off clothing was more likely to have been given away to servants, or others in need of charity, than to have been bequeathed to relatives, but nonetheless garments lasted far longer than most of us could expect of items in our own wardrobes. This had a major impact on the profitability of the dressmaking trade.

We have grown accustomed to the idea that labour costs are greater than the cost of materials. In the 19th century the reverse was the case. Fabric was comparatively expensive, but labour was cheap and plentiful, and the prevailing economic theory dictated that markets should find their own level. There was no general acceptance of the idea of 'a living wage'. Various authors have described how women's employment actually contracted in the 19th century as work moved out of the home and into the workplace⁷⁶. Women who had previously been part of the family 'production unit' found their role reduced to a purely domestic one. Meanwhile, men's working identities became more fixed and women were formally excluded from more and more trades, either by combinations of men desperate to protect their livelihoods in an oversubscribed market, or by legislation intended to protect women's interests. Women, if they were to work at all, were expected, by the mid 19th century, to be employed in jobs that were an extension of their domestic role - housework, cookery, childcare - and needlework. Within the needle trades, millinery and dressmaking were seen as the most 'respectable' branches, so they attracted both girls of good families who had fallen on hard times and girls from poor families with aspirations to better themselves. In a world in which needlework was an important part of many girls' education, the rawest newcomer to the dressmaking workshop could make a useful contribution.

Even distressed gentlewomen might try to earn a little money by selling their needlework through one of the numerous charitable societies that existed. In 1878 The Ladies' Treasury alone carried details of nine such societies, most of which were supported by subscription⁷⁷.

⁷⁶ See, for example, op cit, Pinchbeck (1930); Shoemaker, Robert, Gender in English Society 1650-1850, (1988). The theory seems first to have been articulated in a Fabian Society tract (No 175) published in 1914.

⁷⁷ They were: The Ladies' Work Society, 31 Sloane Street; The Gentlewoman's Self-Help Institute, Portman Square; The Ladies' Industrial Society, 11, Porchester Street; The Society for the Sale of Work of Ladies of Limited Means, 47 Weymouth Street; The Depot for the Sale of Ladies' Work, Manchester Square; The Society for the Employment of Ladies with Small Means, Horncastle, Lincolnshire; The Depot for Ladies' Needlework, Portman Square; The Depot for Ladies' Needlework, Brighton; The Society for the Sale of Ladies' Work, Dublin.

For spinsters or widows of slightly less genteel origins, left with a small inheritance, the setting up of a little dressmaking business was one of the few ways open to them of earning a respectable living. In 1858 John Thompson of Manchester, about to sail to New Zealand, set his wife Elizabeth up in partnership with Mary Elizabeth Tasker as '*Tasker and Thompson, milliners and dressmakers*'. He intended thus to provide her and their three children with an income in his absence, and a means of livelihood if he did not return. He took premises for them, provided £1,250 '*for furnishing the said premises and carrying on the said trade or business*' and appointed two local businessmen as trustees to look after the women's interests. Fortunately for his family he did return, for the business failed, and within two years only £600 of the capital remained ⁷⁸. Tasker and Thompson started out on a firmer financial footing than many firms; their failure may have been due to mismanagement or incompetence, but the speed with which the firm failed does highlight the precarious nature of the trade.

Dressmakers' clients, accustomed to the high level of service available in 19th century England, expected to be dressed in garments of their choice that fitted and flattered, often at very short notice. Nineteenth century fashion changed swiftly and dressmakers, unlike tailors, regularly had to learn ways of creating and cutting new shapes. Alterations made when the completed garment did not fit, or when the client changed her mind, were seldom charged for. Remaking and adapting clothes to the latest fashion formed a large part of the dressmaker's work but paid very badly.

These factors all combined to ensure that needle workers were amongst the poorest paid and most exploited members of the 19th century work force.

Their plight was well-known to contemporaries. The impoverished, down-trodden dressmaker became a familiar figure in literature and art. They were one of the first categories of workers to be examined by the interviewers of the Children's Employment Commission in 1841-2.

'The evidence of all parties establishes the fact that there is no class of young people in this country, living by their labour, whose happiness, health and lives, are so unscrupulously sacrificed as those of the young dressmakers. They are in a peculiar degree unprotected and helpless'

⁷⁸ Manchester Central Reference Library M/C 1402-1404

reported R.D.Grainger in 1843⁷⁹. They were examined again in 1864 and the reports showed that, though conditions in the trade had improved a little in twenty years, dressmakers' apprentices were still one of the most abused groups of young people in the work force.

On the other hand dressmakers were often also seen as immoral. They worked in a trade that was concerned with finery and outward show, and there were fears that young dressmakers would be tempted to dress in ways not appropriate to their station and would attract the attentions of unsuitable young men. In C.R.Doggett's Nellie Graham, the Young Dressmaker Nellie's Aunt Rachael tries to dissuade her niece from becoming a dressmaker for just such reasons -

*'-- I'm very sorry Nellie should prefer such a business to going into service where she would learn to be a good servant, and also a good and useful wife if she should ever marry --- it will be a life of much greater temptation and much harder work than going into service; besides not being nearly so healthy, either for mind or body ---'*⁸⁰.

The long hours commonly worked in the trade meant that un-chaperoned young girls might have to walk home alone late at night and could fall prey to dishonourable men. This connected with a long-standing link in the public mind between dressmaking and prostitution - stemming partly from a combination of the factors outlined above, and partly, perhaps, from a male fear of an exclusively female occupation. Even those novels written about young dressmakers of unimpeachable virtue usually contained references to their colleagues or acquaintances who were tempted into sins of various kinds, partly to illustrate the perils of the trade and partly, no doubt, to highlight the virtue of the heroine. Two articles by Mayhew which appeared in November 1849 in the Morning Chronicle reported interviews with needlewomen who had become prostitutes and did nothing to dispel this impression. In actual fact I have found very little evidence of a real link between dressmaking and prostitution.

The dressmaking trade did not exist in a vacuum. Like the rest of the country, it was affected by prevailing economic, political and social trends. Local trade booms and recessions affected dressmakers in particular areas or those who worked for specific classes of customer. Even the fortunes of individual clients had their effect as we shall see in the appendices. Contemporary attitudes to vanity and thrift helped create the moral climate in which dressmakers worked. Developments in advertising and marketing

⁷⁹ Report of the Royal Commission on Children and Young Persons in Trades and Manufactures, Vol X, (1843) p.F32

⁸⁰ Doggett, C R, Nellie Graham the Young Dressmaker, (1874), p.21

techniques helped them sell their wares; new inventions eased their labour. Novelists and artists depicted dressmakers according to the literary and aesthetic mores of their period. Social reformers pigeonholed them in categories which we have long since abandoned as politically incorrect⁸¹. A study of the 19th century dressmaking trade tells us much about its period as does - say - a study of music, or architecture or medicine or warfare. History is all of a piece.

Most especially, the study of the dressmaking trade makes a vital contribution to the history of women. For most of our period, dressmaking was unique in being a trade carried on almost entirely by women, exclusively for women. The fact that 19th century society saw women as inferior to men coloured the experience of both client and tradeswoman, but for both, dressmaking was an important cultural activity, allowing them to exercise taste, creativity and some commercial independence. Its study enables us to take a close look at women in business, and women as customers, women exploiting other women, women's taste, the social conventions by which their lives were confined and women spending (albeit their husbands' and fathers' money) on goods for their own benefit and pleasure.

⁸¹ The 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, and 'fallen women', for example.



Le Clerc del.

Dupin sculp.

TAILLEUR COSTUMIER ESSAYANT UN COR A LA MODE.

Il est vêtu d'un habit noisette à collet noir de velours, deux boutonnières d'or, les boutons et boutonnières de l'habit de même, une veste de tricot cerise avec une tresse d'or, culotte de velours noir, et bas de soie gris : la jeune personne n'a qu'un simple jupon et des bas blancs, et son cor couvert de batiste teinte en jaune.

Plate 1. Illustration from Galerie des Modes, (1778) showing a male tailor measuring a lady clad only in her chemise and corset.

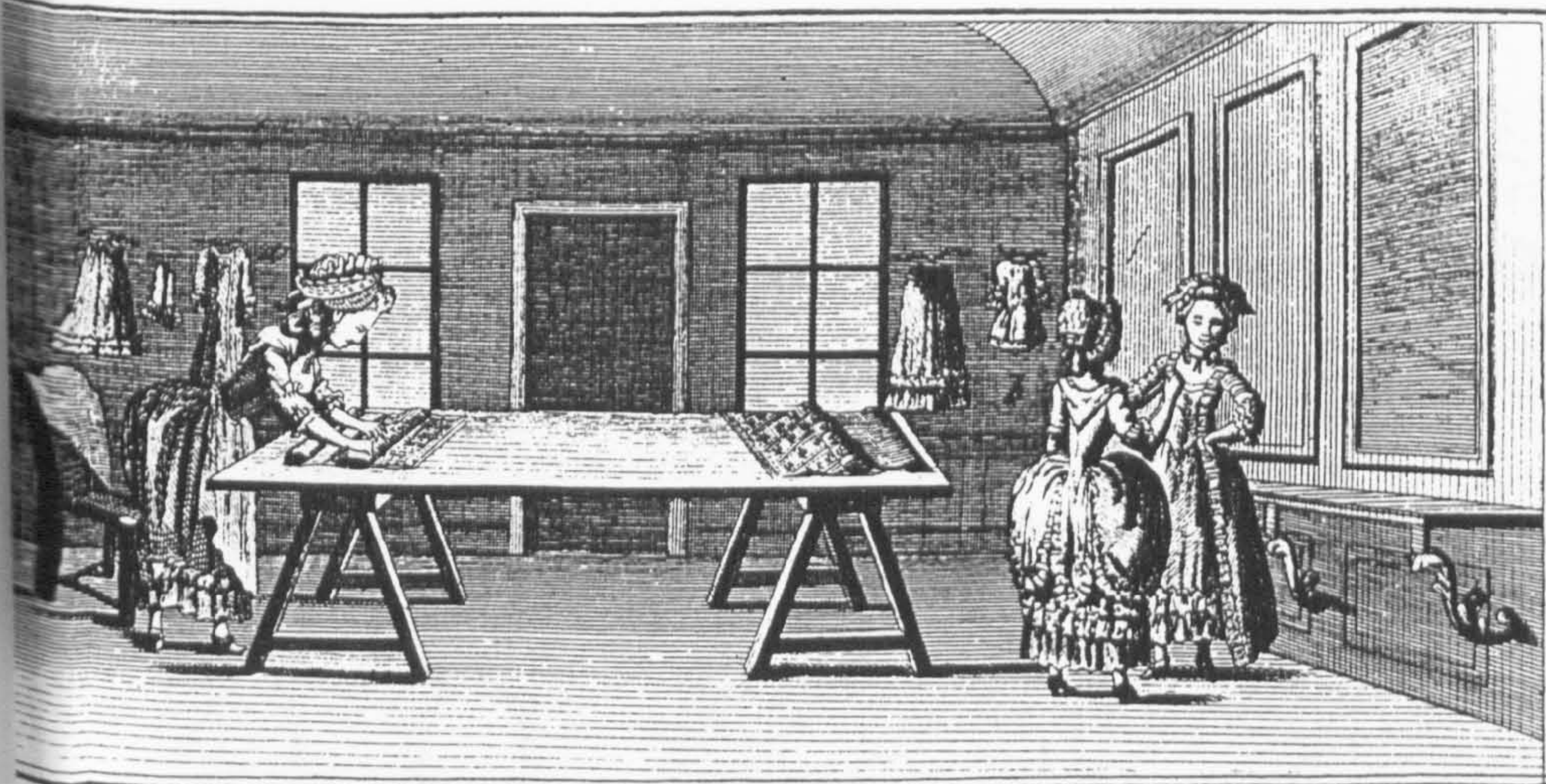


Plate 2

The workroom of a dress maker and diagrams to show the pattern of a sack-backed gown, from the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* of 1748. In this case the workers are women

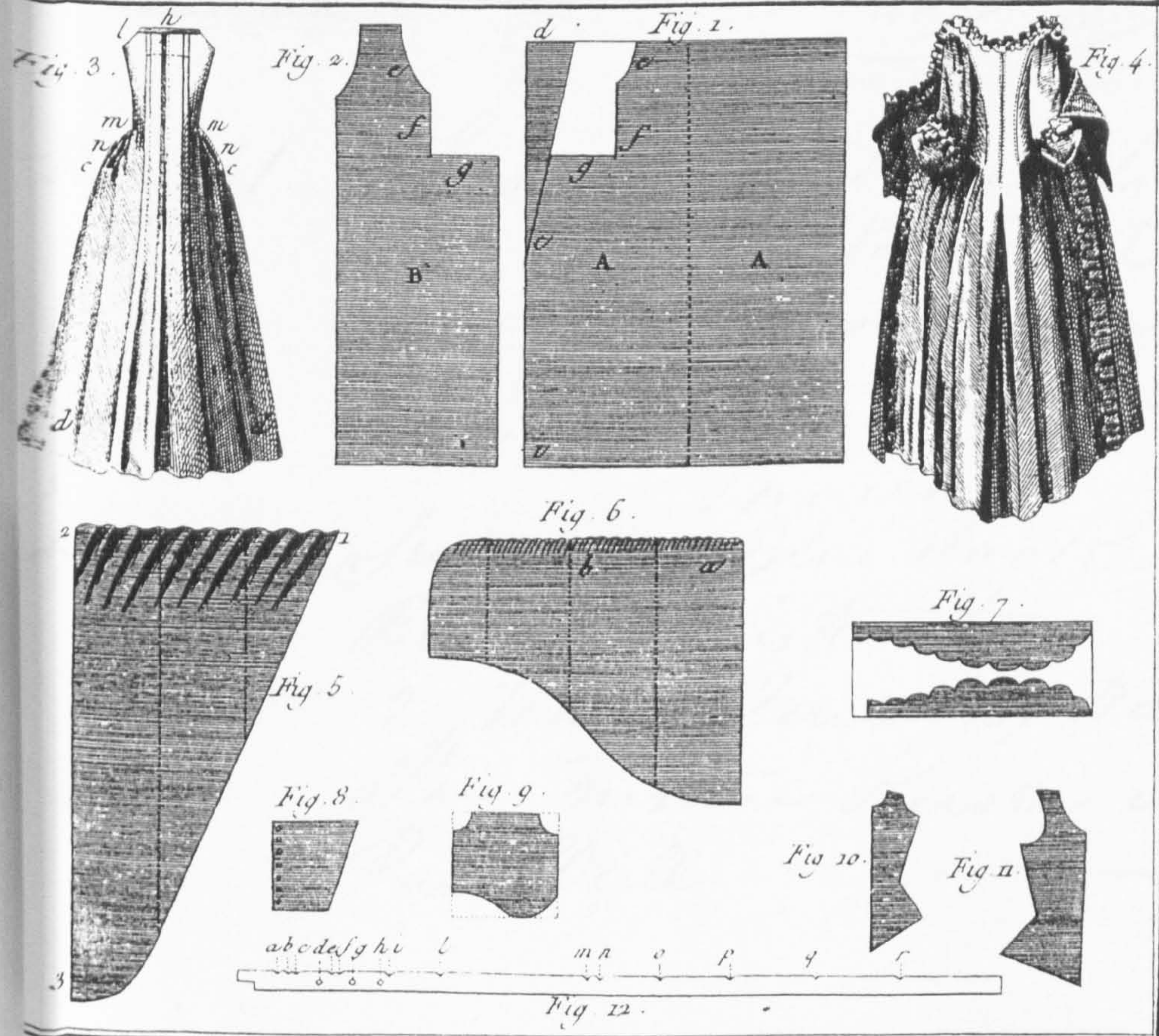


Plate 3. A tailor measuring a lady customer, c.1720. Women's garments hang on the wall. This is clear evidence that tailors did make women's wear.



HIGH STREET.
Leicester.

1842



The Rev. Mr. Ord

TO THOMAS MOXON,

TAILOR & WOOLLEN DRAPER.

LADIES' RIDING HABITS, PELISSES &c. neat & elegantly Braided.

GENTLEMEN'S BOX & RIDING COATS &c. Made in a Superior Style.

LIVERIES MADE ON THE MOST REASONABLE TERMS.



May 31.	(Sons) Super Blue Jacket	— 1. 14"
	Black Waistcoat	— 13"
	Pr. Check Hussy Trowsers	— 1. 4"
	2 Pr. White Drill D ^o	— 1. 8"
	Braces	— 1"
June 13.	Superfine Blue Jacket	— 1. 14"
	Black Waistcoat	— 13"
	2 White Quitting Waistcoats	— 1. 4"
	Pair mixture Hussy Trowsers	— 1. 4"
	Pair Drill	— 14"
		<hr/>
		£ 10. 9. —

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Plate 4.

Letterhead, dated June 1842, for Thomas Moxon, a Leicester tailor and woollen draper who advertised that he made ladies' riding habits and pelisses. Tailors continued to make ladies' riding habits and some jackets and cloaks throughout the 19th century, but by this date other female garments were made by women

Chapter one

Dressmakers in Fact and Fiction

' - - one of Fiction's highest uses is to interest and affect the general mind in behalf of anything that is clearly wrong - to stimulate and rouse the public soul to a compassionate or indignant feeling that it must not be' (Charles Dickens, 1854¹)

Most ladies visited their dressmakers regularly, but few of them really knew what went on behind the closed doors of the dressmaking workroom. Throughout our period an army of writers, novelists, artists and social reformers were anxious to enlighten them. Theirs' was the evidence on which contemporaries built their picture of dressmakers and the dressmaking trade. In this chapter, I shall look at this material and attempt to evaluate it. It comes from a mixture of sources - plays, novels, paintings, social surveys, newspaper articles, government reports - all of which affected each other. Novelists and artists were inspired by government surveys, and their work in its turn influenced popular opinion and precipitated further investigations, and, ultimately, legislation. I shall therefore treat the evidence chronologically rather than by type. It is important to stress that much of this chapter deals with perceptions of dressmakers; as subsequent chapters will show, these did not always reflect reality.

18th century images

As early as 1747, Richard Campbell warned of the low wages in millinery and mantua making. Milliners and mantua makers made

'vast profits --- yet give but poor, mean Wages to every Person they employ under them: Though a young Woman can work neatly in all manner of Needle-Work, yet she cannot earn more than Five or Six Shillings a Week, out of which she is to find herself in Board and Lodging².

It would follow, therefore, that there must already in the mid 18th century have been a class of underpaid, overworked young women employed as dressmakers. In 1811 The Book of Trades or Library of Useful Arts again warned that

'The business of a mantua-maker, when conducted on a large scale and in a fashionable situation, is very profitable; but the mere work-women do not make gains at all adequate to their labour; they are frequently obliged to sit up to very late hours, and the recompense for extra-work is in general a poor remuneration for the time spent. Young women ought,

¹ Quoted by Merriman, John, A History of Modern Europe from the Renaissance to the Present, (1996), p.695

² Op cit, Campbell, (1747) p.208

perhaps, rarely to be apprenticed to this trade unless their friends can, at the end of the term, place them in a reputable way of business, and can command such connections as shall, with industry, secure their success.'

However, artists and writers cheerfully ignored this reality. Eighteenth and early 19th century cartoons and prints show dressmakers as strong, jolly and showily dressed. (Plate 5) At the same time, milliners and dressmakers appeared frequently in plays and novels, but like servants, they were not presented as real characters but were used as a sort of literary device to cross the social divide. Lovesick young men could be made to meet a dressmaker in the street, en route to fit a client or purchase goods (fictional dressmakers spent an improbably long time away from their workrooms) and could persuade her to pass messages to their loved ones. It was not, of course, credible to allow the gentlemen to speak directly to their ladies. Dressmakers were portrayed as inveterate match makers. Where they were given any sort of personality, they were shown as brash, vulgar and usually over-dressed, but also as clever, scheming and basically good-hearted. In Douglas Jerrold's The White Milliner of 1825, the milliners, together with a soldier, were used as a sort of comic chorus³. In John Madison Morton's The Milliner's Holiday, written the same year, the Misses Potts, Dotts, Totts, Watts and Lotts are presented as a fearsome band - strong, fearless, threatening, loud and vulgar. *'Milliners out for a holiday! I'd as soon have met a drove of wild bulls!'* whimpered one of the hapless young men they encountered. Wanted 1000 Young Milliners for the Gold Diggings by J Stirling Coyne, first performed in October 1852, is a late example of the genre. The story is threadbare - six bored young solicitors place the advert in the hopes of meeting some young women - but the costume directions are interesting. Most of the milliners are to wear *'Neat bonnets, scarfs, shawls, aprons and muslin or stuff dresses'* - standard clothing for modest young working women - but Angelica, the ageing apprentice, desperate to find herself a man, was to have an *'Extravagant bonnet, black visite⁴, muslin dress'*. She was, in other words, to be mutton, over-dressed as lamb.

Sadly, such works tell us little about real tradeswomen. Working class women who dressed above their station and were on intimate terms with their betters, were an anomaly and a threat to social stability. It was safest to turn them into comic characters, stereotypes of vulgar, scheming, man-mad women - fantasy figures whose profession defined their supposed characters. Nurses fulfil a similar role today. Our

³ Jerrold became Mayhew's father-in-law and had the opportunity to learn - if he did not already know in 1825 - what conditions for milliners were really like. For further information about Mayhew, see pp.53-54

⁴ A type of mantle

greatest fears now are of illness and death. Nurses have a scary familiarity with these things, so they, too, are sometimes neutralised by being portrayed as sex objects. Jerrold, Mortimer, Coyne and their ilk tell us no more about dressmakers than a pornographic film set in a nurses' home tells us about the medical profession, but the stereotypes they created had a real effect in establishing a psychological link between dressmaking and promiscuity.

The Children's Employment Commission of 1843

Social surveys provide more reliable information. Nineteenth century society was increasingly concerned about poverty and women's and children's work. In 1834 when the new Poor Law Act was passed, poverty was still seen almost as a crime and the Union workhouses were deliberately made as unpleasant as possible to deter all but the most desperate. However, some tentative efforts at employment legislation were made. An Act of 1833 instituted factory inspection and limited working hours for women and children, and in 1847 the 'Ten Hours' bill further limited the working day for women and children under 16. Further Factory Acts between 1845 and 1875 extended the range of trades to which legislation applied⁵. In 1840 came the first attempt to protect sweeps' climbing boys, and in 1842 legislation banned women from working underground. These reforms were inspired by humanitarian motives, but there were other imperatives, and chief amongst them was concern about women in the workplace. Respectable Victorian men had very ambivalent views about women, and their wives and daughters led restricted, over-protected lives. Ladies did not work. *'My opinion'* explained a correspondent to the Englishwomen's Domestic Magazine in 1866 *'is that if a woman is obliged to work, at once (although she may be a Christian and well-bred) she loses that peculiar position which the word lady conventionally designates'*⁶. She spoke for contemporaries of both genders. Working women were thought to be in moral danger from contact with men in their places of work, and to be putting the welfare of their families at risk. Women of the lower classes, who had always worked, did not necessarily appreciate attempts at 'protection', which in factories had the effect of segregating the sexes and ensuring that women's wages remained lower than men's.

⁵ The first Factory Act of 1802 regulated the employment of pauper children, and another of 1819 limited children's working hours.

⁶ Englishwomen's Domestic Magazine, Volume 8, (1866), p.59, quoted by Callen, Anthea, in Attfield, J and Kirkham P, A View from the Interior, feminism, women and design (1989), p.153

None of the above legislation applied to dressmaking workshops, but as part of the movement for improving working conditions for the young, a Royal Commission was set up in 1841 to enquire into '*Children and Young Persons in Trades and Manufactures*'. In 1843, this Children's Employment Commission (as it is generally known) produced its first report, and apprentices in the dressmaking and millinery trades were among the first categories of workers to be assessed.

The commissioners were middle class, male authority figures - not the sort of people with whom young working women would feel at ease. Nonetheless many women seem to have talked freely to them. By modern standards their methods of enquiry were seriously flawed. Nowhere do we learn what proportion of firms the commissioners were able to visit in the towns they studied, nor do we know how they selected their interviewees or the places they chose to visit. We do not know whether they published all the interviews they were given or whether they made a selection, nor do we know whether the published interviews are a complete record of their respondents' statements. We can only deduce what questions were asked and clearly not all interviewees were questioned in the same way. Different commissioners dealt with different towns and their methods were not uniform - some reported names, some only gave initials, some used reported speech, some wrote synopses. Even when they tried to be unbiased their findings were woolly. When reporting the views of Bristol employers who supported the idea of legislation to limit hours of work, for example, they were careful to note that there were other dressmakers in the town who thought such legislation would be '*inexpedient and impracticable*' - but they did not name them or give the numbers for and against⁷. Nonetheless, by allowing their informants to speak for themselves they produced a compelling and shocking record.

Typical was Miss Bryan of Birmingham, who claimed considerable experience of the trade in several places:-

'In Birmingham the regular hours of work are from 8AM to 8PM, but in the busy season they begin earlier, or work later, or both, generally commencing at 8am and working till 10 or 11 pm sometimes they go on later - last night they left off at 2 in the morning. Was formerly at Sheffield as an assistant, where the hours were much longer. The Young Person whose place she took had left for her health, but she died on the day month on which she left; her health had been previously impaired by working at Leamington. During the whole time she never left off earlier than 12, beginning at 7am - these were considered the regular hours; very regularly they worked until 2 in the morning, and three times all night. The two principals used frequently to work on a Sunday; she herself would never do this ----- In

⁷ Op cit, Children's Employment Commission 1843, Volume X , p.d54

*some watering places during the season [she] believes the young people often have not more than three hours sleep ---*⁸

Conditions varied from place to place, but everywhere workers complained of the long hours and 'continuous sitting' which prevented any attempts at 'proper instruction and recreation'. Nonetheless, conditions in the provinces were better than in London, as Bristol interviewees 249 and 250 pointed out. Interviewee 250 had worked through the night three times a week in London, but considered that 'in the country the hours have always been much more moderate'. Interviewee 251 recalled that dressmakers had worked shorter hours in Cork where she had been apprenticed, and 263 had worked shorter hours as an apprentice 'in the country', but nonetheless, 254 felt Bristol dressmakers had 'nothing to complain of'. 257 had worked as a dressmaker's assistant for 26 years and believed that hours of work had become 'very much shorter' in her lifetime, implying that conditions at the beginning of the century must have been appalling. Interviewee 265, at Clifton, agreed with her, though, as an employer, she said she liked her young ladies to start work at 4 am in summer and work until 8 or 9 at night. She must have thought that a sixteen hour day that finished before midnight sounded better than one that finished at 2 am! Like most employees and some employers, she felt that a law imposing shorter hours would be a good thing, but it would have to be rigidly enforced to prevent unscrupulous firms undercutting their rivals.

Bristol was a fashionable centre. In less fashion-conscious Norwich, conditions were better - only interviewee 273 admitted to having occasionally worked as late as midnight on Saturdays. But in Nottingham, Mary Scott (interviewee 602) reported how, as an apprentice in the town, she had often worked until 2 and 3 am 'Her health was so seriously injured that for several years it was not restored. It is not at all unusual in the first houses in the country towns to work these long hours'. Nonetheless, Ms Scott had gone on to set up her own business. We do not know how she treated her own staff, but Ann Abbott in Leicester (interviewee 608) normally worked her staff from 8 am to 8 or 9 pm, only occasionally keeping them until 11pm

'-- this excess very rarely occurs, because when any particular order requires it she obtains extra assistance --- [She] is convinced, from a long acquaintance with the business, that these long hours are not at all beneficial to the principals, they lead to negligence and waste'.

⁸ Ibid, interviewee no 604. The following quotations all come from VolumeX and can be located by the interviewees' reference numbers.

⁹ Ibid, interviewee 232 at Bristol

Good management was of the essence in enabling firms to keep reasonable hours. Mesdames Tomlinson and Hurt (interviewees 610), in Leamington, employed a large live-in staff. They claimed their forewoman *'Always calculates the number of dresses, etc. they can make in a week, and when that number is full she does not take any more orders that week'*. Miss Lloyd (interviewee 612), who as an improver in Leamington was called at 6 am and regularly worked until midnight, tried to treat her own staff rather better, having them work from 4 or 5 am until 8 pm. Fourteen year-old, Harriet Wayre (interviewee 613), her apprentice, agreed that she worked those hours.

Clearly some dressmakers operated under dreadful conditions. The commissioners did their best to uncover these but they were totally dependent on the co-operation of employers. It was impossible for them to check the accuracy of everything they were told and no doubt most employers put the most favourable gloss they could on the evidence they presented. Few apprentices had the courage to criticise their employers - for example, did the Bristol fourteen year-old who appears as interviewee 241 really *'like the work very much'* - especially as she was going to have to continue with it, unpaid, for the next seven years? Forewomen and assistants were more forthcoming in their criticisms, even though some of them disguised their evidence as being the experience of 'friends' elsewhere, but Mr Grainger commented that *'I repeatedly noticed a great disinclination on the part of the young persons to state what they knew, and this owing to a feeling of intimidation which was very prevalent'*¹⁰.

The immediate result of the Commissioners' report was the formation, in March 1843, of the Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners. The Association was the brainchild of a group of philanthropic ladies, and it existed as a registry for employers and employees. It offered certain safeguards in that employers were vetted before being placed on the Association's register, so employees were assured that the firms they were sent to would conform to minimum standards. The Association was also committed to the reform of conditions within the trade, namely

- '1. To induce the principals of dressmaking and millinery establishments to limit the hours of actual work to 12 per diem, and to abolish working on Sundays*
- 2. To promote improved ventilation*
- 3. To aid in obviating the evil connected with the present system, by inducing ladies to allow sufficient time for the execution of orders*
- 4. To provide pecuniary assistance to deserving young persons in temporary distress*

¹⁰ Ibid, introduction p.F33

*5. To afford to such young persons as require it early and effective medical advice, change of air, and other assistance in sickness*¹¹.

It was a worthy initiative. The Association was most active in London and did have some effect on conditions, though it was never wealthy enough to fulfil all its aims. It was succeeded by a number of equally impotent but well-meaning organisations¹².

The Children's Employment Commission report caught the imagination of novelists and artists. Subsequent Commissions highlighted the plight of workers in other trades, many equally horrifying, but with much less effect. No other category of women workers - potters, calico printers, paper makers, dyers, bleachers, straw plaiters, lace-makers, glovers - produced the same outpouring of sentimental fiction and painting as did the poor needleworkers. Thomas Hood's Song of the Shirt, first published in Punch in December 1843, is still well known.

It was a theme that inspired many artists and writers and I will evaluate the work of selection of them. Most of the authors whose writing is discussed here are virtually unknown, but their work has been chosen because it includes lengthy descriptions of dressmaking practice or illustrates situations that have become clichés.

The Young Milliners

Mrs Elizabeth Stone wrote The Young Milliners in 1843, within months of the Royal Commission report being published, and made no secret of her agenda. She was writing

¹¹ Yeo and Thompson, The Unknown Mayhew (1971) p.527

¹² These included the Distressed Needlewomen's Association founded in January 1847. Their major contribution was the establishment of a registration scheme for employers and employees which vetted dressmaking firms on its register. They ran the Distressed Needlewomen's Home, founded in 1852, and also issued a magazine The Sempstress, the first - and only - issue of which appeared in October 1855. The Milliners' and Dressmakers' Provident Association was founded in 1849 to run in conjunction with the Association for the Aid of Milliners and Dressmakers to 'make provision --- for old age and misfortune'. The Glasgow Milliners' and Dressmakers' Association was founded in 1861 but had petered out by 1863. The Manchester branch met a similar fate, but by 1870 there was a Female Provident Association there which was started primarily for the benefit of Manchester's needlewomen. In 1865 the Dressmaking Company was founded in London to monitor working conditions and provide accommodation. For further information about these initiatives see op cit, Walkley, (1981) pp.92-107.

'In an attempt to awaken attention to the miseries which a great number of people --- endure in their exertions to gain their daily bread, viz., the Milliner's Apprentice, and other Needleworkers, of London, more especially -- '13.

Following a formula that was to become familiar, Mrs Stone made her heroine - Ellen Cardan - experience or witness all the abuses the trade had to offer. Ellen was apprenticed to a court dressmaker - Sally Minnow - who traded as Madame Sarina (*'not Sally, mind'*¹⁴) Mineau. Madame Mineau was a relatively good employer but Ellen's job was boring. Her *'occupation was to thread needles, hand pins, find stray scissors, and so forth, till dinner time, ditto after dinner, till tea time; and ditto, repeated, after tea till supper time'*¹⁵

Mrs Stone gave her heroine sensitivities that would endear her to middle class readers - Ellen was embarrassed about undressing and saying her prayers in the bedroom she shared with the other apprentices. Ellen was also, of course, beautiful, and so was expected to model bonnets for customers, showing herself off in a way no modest young Victorian woman would have been expected to enjoy *'your beauty will expose you to many a bold gaze and fulsome compliment. It cannot be helped: good customers must not be offended -- '16.*

True to form, Ellen worked crippling long hours, sometimes sitting up all night, sometimes standing at her work to keep herself awake. Early on, the forewoman told her *'-- if dresses are to be made in no time, we can have no time to sleep -- '17.* One morning, having worked all night, and yawning with tiredness, she took a dress to a client *""Tired! What, at 8 o'clock in the morning"" exclaimed the unconscious young lady'*¹⁸. On another occasion Mrs Stone made her heroine work *'upwards of seventy hours*

¹³ Stone, Mrs Elizabeth, The Young Milliners. (1843), Preface

¹⁴ Ibid p.19

¹⁵ Ibid p. 29

¹⁶ Ibid p. 118

¹⁷ Ibid p. 79

¹⁸ Ibid p. 111

consecutively' and then in a footnote referred her readers to the '*Report and Appendices of the Children's Employment Commission lately presented to Parliament, and published since these pages were written*'¹⁹.

Mrs Stone also introduced - rather clumsily, it must be said - a range of other characters to point up other abuses. There were the Lamberts, a family of shirtmakers, friends Ellen helped when she had time, who were struggling to survive against impossible odds. Then there was a dreadful employer called Mrs Modish who would call in on the girls toiling in her workroom, drinking a glass of gin on her way to bed, while expecting them to sit up working most of the night on her behalf. And finally there was Bessy. Bessy was a fellow dressmaker, and Ellen was made to spell out to her whose fault it was that they had to work such long hours '*Why, the ladies themselves. You cannot imagine, Bessy, how unreasonable they are; how little thought they have for us --*'²⁰. Bessy soon decided there was a better way to make a living. Thereafter Ellen met her twice. The first time she was beautifully dressed, but the second '*-- even Ellen, inexperienced as she was, could not doubt the vocation of the exposed wretch before her --*'²¹.

The Unprotected, or Facts in Dressmaking Life

The Unprotected, or Facts in Dressmaking Life by 'A Dressmaker' was published in 1857 and relied on similar source material. The introduction is taken verbatim from '*evidence put before the House of Commons in 1855*'²². The story follows Clara, a young apprentice working for a Mrs Morterton. Like Ellen Cardan, she is exposed to all the vices of the trade. Mrs Morterton refuses to look after girls who become ill, and sends them home to their families; she stints her employees' food; she has her forewoman keep a difficult employee at '*close work*' for weeks on end; she keeps a girl who has come to her without a premium as a '*runner*' for five years rather than the usual three. Her staff are pestered by young men when they are out running errands after dark. Long hours are obligatory, clients must always be obliged, and '*Lady Emily*' who takes an interest in the plight of the work women and makes a point of ordering

¹⁹ Ibid p. 289

²⁰ Ibid, p.122

²¹ Ibid p.341

²² I have been totally unable to discover what this information was, but to judge from the material quoted in her introduction (pp.vii -xii), she actually means the Children's Employment Commission of 1843.

her dresses well in advance, is ridiculed '*she laughed - coldly laughed, to think of you wanting to save our strength. It was no better for us, we only did other people's things instead.*'²³

Proprietress and forewoman were both indifferent to the girls' suffering -

*'Miss Smith, however short the notice may be, never disappoint --- Never see pale faces; take no notice whatever of headaches, side-aches, and finger aches, and as to fainting fits, why, girls find it convenient to faint sometimes --'*²⁴. *'Oh, it is someone fainting, I dare say. Don't look so white over it. I have seen three and four faint, one after the other, and then a fifth has given us a turn at hysterics --- It is no uncommon thing here ---'*²⁵.

Mrs Morterton had no compunction about lying to the Royal Commissioners about the hours her staff worked, and she was equally happy to deceive her customers.

*'Here's a game! Lady St Aubyn innocently thinks that I am getting it [a bonnet] out of a case just arrived from Paris. Give me a bit of silver paper, and tuck a little into the bow, will you, because things are always most carefully packed "to cross the Channel"; and pray give the strings a light roll up, that they may look curly and as if just unrolled --'*²⁶.

Mrs Morterton was careful to protect her own daughter, seventeen year old Minnie, from the dangers of the workroom. *'I strictly forbid you entering [the workroom] after five in the evening; the air is too impure for a delicate girl like you ---'*²⁷. And just in case the reader missed the point *'If any of them are ill, and die, which they sometimes do, I can replace them; but if you were to die, what on earth should I do? No-one can replace you'*²⁸. To emphasise this heartlessness, the reader was reminded that the young women in question were highly respectable. *'There is Miss Wilson, she was four years at the*

²³ Dressmaker, A, The Unprotected or facts in dressmaking life (1857) p.105

²⁴ Ibid p.48

²⁵ Ibid p.33

²⁶ Ibid pp.27-28

²⁷ Ibid p.16

²⁸ Ibid p.83

*best finishing school in Norfolk; and Adelaide Graham, she can speak French; and Clara Thompson can play, sing, draw ---*²⁹.

Not that speaking French did Adelaide Graham much good. One day she went missing. *'After an anxious and diligent search, Adelaide Graham was found - the mistress of a small establishment, but not the wife of its master; and, alas! in a fair way of becoming a mother --*³⁰. This was not surprising, of course, for dressmakers' workshops were depicted as hotbeds of depravity. Conversation amongst the girls was *'frivolous'* and deeply distressing to a proper young woman like Clara -

*'To be compelled to listen to the avowal of principles she had been taught to condemn, or the discussion of some work of fiction, the principles of which were not always of the purest kind, was abhorrent to her whole nature ---*³¹.

If this was not shocking enough for readers, the chapter leadenly entitled *'Stumbling Block to Religious Progress'* hammered the point home. Girls were too exhausted to read their bibles, they fell asleep while at prayer or in church, and some, horror of horrors, actually did their own mending on Sundays. Only the strongest would emerge from such conditions with their virtue intact.

Rather improbably, the voice of sweet reason was given to young Minnie Morterton. On page 17 she prattled innocently to her mother

'If I sat there [in the workroom] now as many hours a day as they do I dare say I should be as pale as Annie is. What a rosy cheeked girl she was when she came - and how like a ghost she has become! What is the cause of it, mamma, do you think?'

By page 308, Minnie not only knew why Annie was so pale, but she had a fully formulated plan to improve conditions. She would set a minimum wage of £1 a week and pay piece rates, but make workers re-do bad work in their own time (to counter the argument that piece rates would encourage the girls to be slapdash). She would reduce hours to a maximum of twelve a day, and less in the slack season, to keep everyone in employment, and she would bring in day workers at busy times, as well as charging live-in staff a fair rate for board and lodging. *'I would rather be thought unbusinesslike than unchristian*

²⁹ Ibid p.81

³⁰ Ibid p.100

³¹ Ibid p.89

*like at any time. I really could not let the girls work as they do --*³² she told her mother sanctimoniously. Mrs Morterton was predictably unimpressed *'Go along with you; your plan would reduce my profits considerably ---'*³³.

Both these novels used government reports as their starting points. The long hours, pitiful wages and debilitating illnesses came from evidence these contained, but the heroines' sensitivities were embellished to gain the readers' sympathies. The criticisms of uncaring clients came from evidence gathered by the Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners, but the gin-swilling neglectful principals were their author's own invention, as was Mrs Morterton's mockery of Lady Emily and Lady St Aubyn. The girls who resorted to prostitution had no parallels in the reports, nor indeed in Mayhew's articles (see below), but harked back to the scurrilous 18th and early 19th century plays discussed previously. The heavy-handed moralising and unremitting tragedy were in the tradition of many contemporary novels. Despite their professed aims, these were essentially works of fiction, and fiction is not necessarily the best medium in which to highlight real abuses.

May Coverley, the young dressmaker

May Coverley, the young dressmaker was published by the Religious Tract society in 1860. (Plates 6 a and b) Their approach was different - they hoped to persuade their readers to support good practice by describing it. May was apprenticed to an excellent employer, Mrs Browne, who employed a devout lady, Miss Davies, as forewoman. The girls were not overworked, all Mrs Browne's clients were thoughtful and ordered their dresses in plenty of time so the workroom staff never had to sit up late, the girls were encouraged to go for walks in the evenings to get some fresh air, but were urged to walk briskly

*'You don't know, perhaps, --- that many persons, who would not dare speak to a lady, think themselves at liberty to say anything they please to a milliner with a band box. I am quite sure, however, that girls themselves are often to blame ---'*³⁴.

But all was not sweetness and light. One girl, Lucy, stole bits of fabric and trimmings. Some she sold, the rest she made into clothes for herself. She was discovered and dismissed, and was subsequently

³² Ibid p.308

³³ Ibid p.317

³⁴ Religious Tract Society Publication, May Coverley, (1860) p. 56

employed and dismissed by a number of other firms. The next time she was seen she was overdressed and with 'unsuitable' companions. The sensibilities of the readers of Religious Tract Society publications were too delicate to bear more information about Lucy's fate, but they were invited to weep for her mother who died of a broken heart!

May became friends with Miss Davies who confided in her the real problems she had encountered while working in London

*'But late hours, as I have said, formed one of the least of my troubles; for I was young and healthy, and I knew that it was only for a short time. What I felt most was the atmosphere of worldliness by which I found myself surrounded - the total absence of all religious observance; for even the Sabbath was sometimes, within the four walls of our workroom, scarcely to be distinguished from other days --'*³⁵.

And while pious readers shuddered in horror at this revelation, they could comfort themselves with the information that long hours were not such an enormous problem after all, and enjoy the idea that the virtuous would be rewarded if they bore their sufferings with fortitude. Such tracts probably did as much harm as good to the worker's cause.

Paintings

Artists, too, produced work to tug at the viewers' heart strings. Numerous paintings added visual images to the debate. Richard Redgrave was proud of his own contribution - *'It is one of my most gratifying feelings, that many of my best efforts in art have aimed at calling attention to the trials and struggles of the poor and oppressed ---'*³⁶. As well as the 'Seamstress' (1846) and 'Fashion's Slaves' (1847), he painted 'The Poor Teacher' and 'Going into Service'. Other artists were similarly inspired and many of them painted needlewomen. Examples are Anna Blunden's 'For Only One Short Hour' (1854), George Frederick Watts' 'The Song of the Shirt' (c.1848-50), Frank Holl's 'The Seamstress'(undated), George Elgar Hicks' 'Snowdrops'(1858), John Everard Millais' 'Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!' (1876), Thomas Mildmay's 'The Needlewoman' (1870s); and the later works like 'Weary' by Edward Radford (1887) or Claude Andrew Calthrop's 'Its not your linen you're wearing out, But human creature's lives' (1891). (Plates 8-18) Such was the power of Thomas Hood's poem that four of the above-mentioned artists used

³⁵ Ibid p.185

³⁶ Quoted in Vicinus, Martha (ed), Suffer and be Still, Women in the Victorian Age, (1973) p.60

lines from it as titles for their paintings. Their sitters were young, beautiful women, usually in bleak, bare, but scrupulously clean attic rooms. But they were not dressmakers.

Most dressmakers worked in workrooms, in groups, under the eye of a forewoman who was responsible for quality control. Such workrooms were crowded, far from picturesque, impossible for an artist to penetrate and difficult to imagine or depict. The painters' subjects were seamstresses - working as outworkers for drapers or wholesalers. Such work was even more badly paid than dressmaking, and was preferred by older women, mothers with young children or daughters caring for elderly or infirm relatives. Young, single, able-bodied women, particularly ones with angelic faces, could earn a much better living doing something else. Only Thomas Benjamin Kennington's 'Adversity', of 1890, (Plate 17) showed two, recently orphaned spinster sisters trying to earn their living as dressmakers. *'There is much quiet pathos in the drawing'* ran the caption *'and the appearance of the girls but emphasises the squalor of their surroundings, and points the freshness of their loss'*. In fact, the room is shabby, but not particularly squalid, the girls, despite their mourning, look healthy, their business is quite well equipped with a sewing machine and a lay figure and they have plenty of work in hand. Their future might well have been quite rosy. There was, in the 19th century, as now, considerable uncertainty about how the needle trades actually worked.

Lettice Arnold

Mrs Anne Marsh in Lettice Arnold (1850) exhibited just this sort of confusion. She too was trying to write propaganda in the form of a novel. Her heroines, Lettice and her sister Myra, were the orphan daughters of a clergyman. All the family money had been spent on medical attention for their father during his last illness and the girls were left to eke out a living as seamstresses. They were totally different characters. Lettice accepted her lot cheerfully, she was a plain girl, but impossibly good; Myra was lazy, sulky and a hypochondriac - but very beautiful. Through them, Mrs Marsh addressed herself to the problem of how poor needlewomen could make a living and decided that it was up to the ladies who ordered work, so she constructed a possible scenario. She described the commission Lettice was working on.

'It had been ordered by a considerate and benevolent lady, who instead of going to the ready-made linen warehouse for what she wanted, gave herself a good deal of trouble to get at the poor work women themselves who supplied these houses, in order that they might receive the full price of their needlework - which otherwise must of necessity be divided between them and the shopkeeper --- I do not mean [ladies should pay] much more than the

*current price for such matters people can habitually give; they should, however, beware of driving hard bargains with the very poor ---*³⁷.

Mrs Danvers, the philanthropic lady in question, was given a good deal of space to explain her cause.

Somehow, Lettice also found herself working on another commission - wedding clothes that turned out to be for an old school friend. Such a commission would, in real life, almost certainly have been placed with a dressmaker, and if by any chance it had been farmed out, there is no way that the client would ever have discovered who made it up. But Mrs Marsh seldom allowed probability to get in the way of her narrative. Once the connection had been established, Catherine, the young bride, and her family effectively adopted Lettice and Myra.

They arranged for Myra to be apprenticed to a Mrs Fisher, who ran a model millinery establishment - thus allowing Mrs Marsh to set out her thoughts on how millinery establishments should be run. Mrs Fisher had trained in a workroom where they worked long hours and were inadequately fed. Then she married a young doctor and set up her own shop, with workrooms that were warm and well-ventilated, and where the girls were all supplied with a heated wooden pipe, wrapped in carpet, to rest their feet on - at the insistence of her husband; *'the extreme coldness of the feet arising from want of circulation, being one of the causes to which Fisher attributed many of the maladies incident to this mode of life'*³⁸. She naturally also supplied *'plenty of good, wholesome, palatable food'*, and insisted that her workers exercise or rest for ten minutes every two hours. *'Nothing indiscreet or unseemly was ever permitted'*³⁹, but if the girls' parents, and Mrs Fisher, approved, they could *'walk out'* with young men. If the association led to marriage, the incredibly generous Mrs Fisher supplied the wedding dress, bonnet, wedding breakfast, and a purse of *'pocket money'*⁴⁰! Myra had indeed fallen on her dainty feet, though not quite in the way she had hoped. Mrs Marsh took a swipe at popular romantic fiction in describing Myra's hopes -

³⁷ Marsh, Mrs Anne, Lettice Arnold (1850) pp 35-36

³⁸ Ibid p.20

³⁹ Ibid p.26

⁴⁰ Ibid p.101

*'She fancied herself elegantly dressed, walking about a show room, filled with all sorts of beautiful things --- Nay, her romantic imagination travelled still further, - gentlemen sometimes came up to showrooms with ladies --- Myra had read plenty of old rubbishy novels when she was a girl'*⁴¹.

Mrs Marsh ensured that the reality was rather different. Myra met and married a young tailor, took advantage of Mrs Fisher's dress, bonnet, wedding breakfast and purse, but was predictably ungrateful *'married in a bonnet as if I was a tradesman's daughter, I am to be. Is it not too provoking?'* she wrote to Lettice. But Mrs Marsh had her revenge. She turned Myra into an opium addict who died young!

Lettice, on the other hand, acted as companion to Catherine's parents, charming her bad-tempered father and encouraging her sweet but inept mother. In due course she met the local curate, Mr St Leger, a schoolfriend of Catherine's husband, Edgar, who - like Lettice, Edgar and Catherine - was a paragon of saintliness. His life had been unbearably tragic - his mother had *'disgraced'* herself, his father had shot himself in shame, his four sisters had all died of consumption - naturally this made him an ideal companion for Lettice! Plausibility played no part in Mrs Marsh's literary universe, and unfortunately its lack (coupled with uneven writing and convoluted sentences) greatly detracted from the effectiveness of her campaigning. When her characters were painted in such brilliant white and heavy black, and their histories were so wildly romantic and improbable, few readers were likely to believe that any part of her narrative was true.

The Seamstress or the White Slave of England

The Seamstress or the White Slave of England by G W M Reynolds was equally badly written and researched. (Frontispiece) The heroine, Virginia Mordaunt, was a dressmaker's outworker, even though she is described as a seamstress in the title. She was seduced and betrayed and died tragically, but it is only the circumstances of her employment that need concern us here. She worked for a Mrs Johnson who sub-contracted for a court dressmaker, Mme Duplessy. Virginia was given far more responsibility than any real outworker would have had. She was given a cut-out dress of valuable velvet to make up, with just the client's measurements to go on. Reynolds' source was probably Mayhew (see below) - his novel was published in 1853, a year after Mayhew's London Labour and the London Poor which described an outworker making up a skirt in Genoese velvet. Skirts required little fitting, and were often

⁴¹ Ibid p.157

made by outworkers, but the bodice of an 1850s gown had to fit like a glove and would have been made in the dressmaker's workroom under the eagle eye of the first hand.

Reynolds' facts were extraordinary. Virginia Mordaunt was paid 3s-6d for making the dress - on which, naturally, she worked all one night until 2 am. 3s-6d was a little on the low side for the making up of an evening dress, but given that Virginia was a sub-sub-contractee it was not an unreasonable payment for a night's work and a good deal more than most assistants earned. Anxious to reinforce his point, Reynolds invented a bill for the outfit:

<i>'18 yards velvet at 1gn a yard</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>18</i>
<i>18 yards silk at 4s a yard</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>lace for berth⁴² and trimmings</i>	<i>15</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>making up</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>4</i>
	<i><u>£42</u></i>	<i><u>2s'</u></i>

It was an astronomical sum and though it may have been possible to buy such expensive velvet in 1853, it was certainly exceptional. Presumably the 18 yards of silk were for lining, though silk was unsuitable for lining bodices and unnecessary for lining a velvet skirt. In any case, lining silk cost a lot less than 4s a yard - and if Virginia had used anything stiffer than lining silk the bodice would have been unwearable. Virginia single-handedly completed the dress in a day and a night without a single fitting - another near impossibility. The bill makes no mention of the sundries all dresses used (bones, hooks or buttons, interlinings) but suggests that the dressmaker supplied what (from the price) must have been antique lace for the berth⁴² and trimmings. This would also have been most unusual - such laces were certainly worn but were usually heirlooms, added by the client. Finally, four guineas for making up is an unprecedented price. Reynolds' heart was in the right place, but he knew too little of his subject to write about it convincingly. Unfortunately, most of his readers would have been much more familiar with prices and dressmakers' bills than he appeared to be, and again his inaccuracy in one area would have called into question his reliability in others.

Fanny the Little Milliner

Fanny the Little Milliner, by Charles Rowcroft, published in 1846, seemed to present a much more convincing picture. The fact that Fanny is a milliner is only incidental to the story, but the conversation she has with her friend Julia explained, without apparent artifice, the difficulties milliners faced, and

⁴² A type of wide collar for a low necked dress

clearly, Rowcroft was trying to inform his readers. The girls discussed an old colleague *'that tall pale girl who used to work extra hours'* who was trying to live on 8s a week (£20 pa).

'And obliged to dress genteelly that she might not discredit the establishment --- You can't get a furnish'd room under 3s a week. Then there's fire - say 4d a week, one week with another. She can't do without light - there's candles and soap - 6d a week, you couldn't do with less. Then there's bread - we ought to have begun with that; - what a pity it is that we can't live without eating! How much shall we put down for bread? - two ½ quartern loaves a week? - no, that's not enough; we must say three - that's 1s - she must help herself out with potatoes say 4d a week for potatoes, We must let her have a morsel of butter with her bread and potatoes, a penny a-day for butter. Then there's tea; tea is as necessary for a poor girl almost as bread; she couldn't drink cold water always; but we can't put down much for that; suppose two ounces of tea a week, that's 6d' 'Two ounces of tea would not be enough to last fourteen times'. 'She must make it do' replied Julia⁴³.

Their calculations added up to 10s-4½d - 2s-4½d more than their friend's wage. It all sounds very convincing, but actually, Rowcroft's figures are dubious. A quartern loaf cost 6d in 1845 (according to Mayhew⁴⁴) so Julia's bread would actually have cost about 9d and her 7d would have bought almost three quarters of a pound of butter, though her 2 ounces of tea would have cost at least the 6d allowed for it. In 1900, (when prices had changed little) 4d worth of potatoes fed a family of three for a week and whole families were spending only 5d a week on soap⁴⁵. Furthermore, if she worked for an establishment that was concerned about how she dressed, Julia was not an outworker but a daily hand. In that case, most of her working day would have been spent at her employer's, where she would also have taken her meals, so she would have paid very little for food and fuel on her own account. Indeed, she could have lived in lodgings rather than having a whole room to herself and paid 1s-6d or 2s a week.

Rowcroft also reflected attitudes to milliners and sex. *'Great ladies very seldom interest themselves about poor milliner girls --- They consider us as mere instruments and machines for administering to their pleasure'*⁴⁶. And when one great lady, Lady Sarum, does interest herself by trying to create

⁴³ Rowcroft, Charles, Fanny the Little Milliner (1846) p.117

⁴⁴ Op cit, Yeo and Thompson, (1971) p.585

⁴⁵ See Pember Reeves, Maud, Round about a Pound a Week (1913- Virago 1979 edition)

⁴⁶ Op cit, Rowcroft, (1846) p.121

*'a benevolent association of ladies of rank and influence, desirous of alleviating the hardships, privations and temptations to which the class of young females in the employment of milliners and dressmakers is particularly exposed --'*⁴⁷

she is soon led to deduce - by the gentleman Fanny has rejected - that *'these milliner girls, I have heard say, are the most artful husseys in nature'*. Even her maid sees Fanny as a *'pale faced - band box carrying minx - that is no better than she ought to be'*⁴⁸. Here mid 19th century reformism stumbled against popular stereotype and capitulated to it. Charles Rowcroft seems to have been uncertain of his own aims.

Prostitution, immorality and dressmakers

The association of dressmaking and loose morals was never far from people's minds. As early as 1747, Richard Campbell in The London Tradesman had cautioned parents

'not to bind their Daughters to this Business: The vast Resort of young Beaus[sic] and Rakes to Milliners' Shops, exposes young Creatures to many Temptations --- The Mistress, tho' honest, is obliged to bear the Wretch's Ribaldry, out of Regard to his Custom, and Respect to some undeserved Title of Quality he wears, --- I am far from charging all Milliners with the Crime of Connivance at the Ruin of their Apprentices; but fatal Experience must convince the Public, that nine out of ten of the young Creatures that are obliged to serve in these Shops, are ruined and undone:---'

And as for mantua makers -

'If a young Creature, when out of her Time, has no Friend to advise with, or be a Check upon her Conduct, it is more than ten to one but she takes some idle, if not vicious Course, by the many Temptations to which her Sex and narrow Circumstances subject her.-- Men pride themselves in debauching such as betray any Marks of modest Virtue ---'

Even in the mid 18th century, therefore, working women were being portrayed as unnatural creatures whose appearance in the workplace threatened to destabilise respectable society. Campbell probably tells us more about the views of contemporary middle class men than about the experiences of contemporary working class women, but he reflected and perpetuated stereotypes.

*'A Youth may be set a-float in the World as soon as he has got a Trade in his Head, without much danger of Spoiling; but a Girl is such a tender, ticklish Plant to rear, that there is no permitting her out of Leading-strings till she is bound to a Husband'*⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid p.181

⁴⁸ Ibid p.183

⁴⁹ Op cit, Campbell, (1747), pp 208-9 and 227-8

The scenarios Campbell described were played out on stage and in novels, but there is little evidence to suggest that they were the stuff of real life. He was not alone in his views.

In 1792 '*Cherub*' the self-styled '*Guardian of Female Innocence*' listed dressmaking establishments - '*Corrupt Milliners*' - along with the stage, fortune tellers and girl's boarding schools, as places inimical to female virtue:

*'Oft has an anxious CHERUB observed the secret scenes, the nocturnal orgies of sensuality, the midnight immolations of female virtue, which are made and celebrated behind the folding shop doors of a millinery deception ---'*⁵⁰.

And in the same year, Mary Wollstonecroft, writing with a totally different agenda, describing '*poor abandoned creatures who live by prostitution*' went on to say '*are not milliners and mantua makers reckoned the next class?*'⁵¹

A curious pamphlet, undated, but probably of about 1810, survives in the British Library. Entitled A Millinery Establishment proved to be a House of Ill fame. Thoughts for parents or why such houses should not be exposed. Being a true exposure of a private house of Ill fame at Gravesend, it purports to tell the true story of a clergyman's daughter who became apprenticed to a dressmaker and was drugged and duped into prostitution⁵².

Only one of the Children's Employment commissioners' interviewees in 1843 - London dressmaker 'BC' - referred to prostitution, when she spoke of young colleagues who had '*gone on the town*' when they were laid off from work⁵³. Dr Devonald of Great Titchfield Street also suggested that this sometimes happened, but seemed sympathetic to girls who went on the streets rather than return to '*such labour*' as their employers expected of them⁵⁴. The commissioners did devote a section of their report to what

⁵⁰ Pamphlet in the British Library by '*Cherub, or the Guardian of Female Innocence*', Exposing the Arts of Boarding Schools, Lewd Fortune Tellers, Corrupt Milliners --- etc (1792)

⁵¹ Wollstonecroft, Mary, Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) quoted in Hill, Bridget, 18th Century Women, an Anthology (1993) p.226

⁵² A pamphlet, published '*at the request of a few members of the Society for the protection of females*' and printed by Paul, at Seven Dials.

⁵³ Children's Employment Commission, Vol X, interviewee no 585

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, interviewee no 625

they described as '*Moral Condition*', but though they referred obliquely to activities '*proverbial among young dressmakers*', most of the section was about Sunday working and houses which expected their employees to be off the premises all day on Sunday, whatever the weather, and regardless of whether they had friends or relatives to visit, thus exposing them to moral dangers⁵⁵. The 1864 report is equally lacking in references to prostitution.

Henry Mayhew's articles are often quoted. In 1849-50 Mayhew recorded numerous interviews with working people in London and wrote them up for the Morning Chronicle. They made lengthy articles, often covering a whole page of the broadsheet. In November 1849, he wrote a series of articles on London needlewomen. In three of these - on November 13th, 23rd, and in the synopsis of the week's articles that appeared on the 14th - he reported on women in the needle trades. Twenty five of his interviewees admitted to immorality, but most of them were, in fact, common law wives, living with men who were not their legal husbands. One of the ones who admitted to prostitution was a widow.

'For three or four years after my husband's death, I struggled on and kept true to his memory, but at last all my clothes were gone [to the pawnshop, presumably] and I was obliged to transgress --- If those who've taken to the streets as a regular practice was to come back again to work, there'd be no chance of a living for them --'

She earned 3s a week as a slop trouser maker. Another was the ubiquitous clergyman's daughter-turned-needlewoman.

'My father was an Independent preacher, and I pledge my word, solemnly and sacredly, that it was the low price paid for my labour that drove me to prostitution. I often struggled against it, and many times have I taken my child into the streets with me to beg rather than I would bring shame upon myself and it any longer. I have made pincushions and fancy articles - such as I could manage to scrape together - and taken them to the streets to sell, so that I might get an honest living, but I couldn't --- I brought home 2s-6d by my shame and stopped its [her child's] cries for two days ---'.

The woman herself had, at the time of the interview, been in service '*with a Christian gentleman*' for some years. Her wretched child was in the workhouse. There were a few other similar cases. Mayhew was a journalist and was writing for a tabloid audience whose consciences he wished to prick. His Morning Chronicle articles were part of a series to which two other 'country' correspondents also contributed. Mayhew's technique was to use individual case studies to illuminate conditions in a whole occupation, and he employed assistants (among them his brother, Gus) to collect this evidence. To interview his needlewomen he advertised meetings at the Chronicle offices, and over 1000 women turned up to one on December 3rd, which took place after a number of his articles on needleworkers had already

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. F33

been published. On this occasion, Mayhew's thunder was stolen by the appearance of Lord Ashley and Mr Sidney Herbert who, mindful of the stir the Chronicle series was causing, offered free passage to needlewomen wishing to emigrate to the colonies.

In 1851 Mayhew left the Chronicle after a quarrel with his editor, and for a few years he recycled and extended his researches, first as four issues of a publication entitled Low Wages; their Causes, Consequences and Remedies. These included readers' letters on poverty and Mayhew's answers. He also produced a book - London Labour and the London Poor (1851). This ensured that his researches reached a wide cross-section of readers, and the publication and re-publication of the Independent minister's daughter's testimony probably to some extent accounts for the numerous fictional clergymen's daughters in the dressmaking trade. Prior to his stint at the Morning Chronicle Mayhew had attempted to earn a living as a playwright and novelist to fund a rackety lifestyle. After the publication of London Labour he disappears from view. His fame was brief, and amongst his most celebrated and shocking discoveries was the evidence he gathered about the London needlewomen. Doubts have been cast on Mayhew's reliability as a reporter⁵⁶. He was not, one feels, a man to let the truth interfere with a good story, but even he could not find many needlewomen - let alone dressmakers - who admitted to having resorted to prostitution.

However, many people relied on his findings. Thomas Hughes in his Lecture on the Slop System was talking about the same class of workers when he quoted what one woman had said -

*'I am sure no girl can get a living at slop work without prostitution; and I say as much after thirteen years experience of the business. I never knew one girl in the trade who was virtuous: most of them wished to be so, but were compelled to be otherwise for mere life'*⁵⁷.

Thomas Hughes was Principal of the London Working Men's College. It was what his listeners expected to hear; it re-enforced all their prejudices and did the poor seamstresses no favours at all. Mr Joseph Harding's '*Second Lecture on the Great Social Evil*' was published in The Magdalen's Friend for 1862. He specifically considered what he called '*the Needlework Question*' and, like Nellie Graham's aunt, blamed the '*false and fatal notions of what is respectable prevailing amongst the middle and*

⁵⁶ See, for example, his entry in Gardiner, Juliet and Wenborn, Neil (eds), The History Today Companion to British History (1995) p.509

⁵⁷ Quoted in Purvis, June, Hard Lessons. the lives and education of working class women in 19th century England (1989), p.34

*lower classes, and the universal mania for dress and finery which pervades all classes --*⁵⁸. Similarly, W Logan in The Great Social Evil: Its Causes, Extent, Results and Remedies (1871) claimed that women who worked in mills, shops, theatres, pubs, and agriculture, or were seamstresses, messengers or flower girls were the ones most likely to turn to prostitution - presumably because they were all so badly paid⁵⁹. However, none of these authorities quoted actual cases to back up their statements, and the whole argument seems to have been self-perpetuating.

Mrs Gaskell's novel, Ruth (1853), is the best example of a work of fiction depicting the dressmaker-prostitute. Ruth is chosen by her employer to go to a ball to do running repairs on ladies' dresses - not because she is an exceptionally good worker, but because of her good looks. At the ball she catches the eye of the well-to-do young man who seduces her and gets her pregnant. Ruth is an orphan with no-one to advise her. Ultimately she is befriended by a Baptist minister and his sister who present her to their community as a young widow with a child. When this petty deception is discovered, both they and she are ostracised. Ruth only redeems herself by selfless nursing during an epidemic and by her resulting death. Mrs Gaskell was the wife of a minister, and as a child had accompanied her doctor uncle on his rounds⁶⁰. She had a strong social conscience and a genuine knowledge of the conditions in which people like her heroine lived. The sentiments she expressed were not necessarily her own, but only by such extreme measures could she gain her readers sympathy for Ruth⁶¹

But there is little real evidence to connect dressmaking with immorality. A study of the census gives few clues. A small number of women had illegitimate children living with them, but that only implies that they had had sex outside marriage, not that they had been paid to do so. Even the family of three illegitimate children in Leicester in 1881 - offspring of a tailoress mother - are not certain evidence that she plied another trade⁶². The records of the prison, workhouse and lunatic asylum in Leicester in 1841, 1861 and

⁵⁸ He was the travelling secretary to the Associate Institution for Improving and Enforcing the Laws for the Protection of Females

⁵⁹ Mahood, Linda, The Magdalenes. Prostitution in the 19th Century, (1990) p.73

⁶⁰ The uncle in question was Dr Peter Holland (born 1766) of Church House, Knutsford - see Gerin, Winifred, Elizabeth Gaskell: a Biography (1976), chapter one.

⁶¹ See Lane, Margaret, introduction to the 1982 Penguin edition of Ruth

⁶² She was Catherine Basford (28), and she had three sons aged 6,4 and 2. She lodged at 35 Christow Street.

1881 show very few dressmaker inmates - and again, dressmakers could have been in any of those institutions for a variety of reasons, none of which necessarily imply prostitution.

	Dressmaker/needlewomen inmates		
	Prison	Workhouse	Lunatic asylum
1841	0	0	1
1861	2	3	7
1881	3	38	4

In the two places where detailed studies have been made of magdalen homes, the results are inconclusive. Linda Mahood’s study of the Glasgow lock hospital between 1870 and 1890 shows that over that period, 33% of the prostitutes treated there were mill girls, 25% were servants, and the rest were machinists, washerwomen and needlewomen⁶³. She does not analyse these findings in any more detail, but some of the needlewomen may have been dressmakers.

Frances Finnegan’s study of prostitution in York lists the previous occupations of 56 inhabitants of the York magdalen home in the middle years of the century, as they appear in the home’s records. Of these, 41 had been servants, 5 had been millworkers, 3 had been barmaids, one had been a laundress, one a nurse, one a pub singer, one a tramp, one a sewing machinist, one a dressmaker, and the last, Elizabeth Irons, had a colourful past - or a vivid imagination - claiming to have been married at 14 and been a bare back rider in a circus! However, she was also able to trace 66 women in the census who were known from other evidence to be prostitutes. Of these, 25 claimed to be dressmakers and 13 others claimed to be needle workers of one sort or another. The rest said they had been servants, charwomen and laundresses. Finnegan concluded that the girls themselves recognised the link between the needle trades and prostitution, and when they were casting around for something plausible to tell the enumerators, they lighted on these occupations⁶⁴. Indeed, Jane Emerson in her paper ‘The lodging market in a Victorian city’ uses Finnegan’s study to suggest that in Exeter too, prostitutes were often enumerated as ‘dressmakers’, though why she believes this, and whether she believes the euphemism was chosen by the enumerators or by the women themselves, is unclear ⁶⁵.

⁶³ Quoted op cit, Mahood, (1990) p.70

⁶⁴ Finnegan, Frances, Poverty and Prostitution: a study of Victorian Prostitutes in York (1979) pp.73-74

⁶⁵ In Southern History, 9 (1987)

The stereotype threatened more than reputations. In the 1860s, concerns about prostitution centred on the increasing incidence of venereal disease within the armed services, supposedly as a result of the men's reliance on the services of prostitutes. The infamous Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 gave the police the power to arrest women suspected of prostitution and force them to be examined by a doctor for evidence of disease. Not unsurprisingly, these powers were much abused, and much resented, and from 1870 there was increasing middle class opposition to the Acts from the Ladies National Association (LNA)⁶⁶. Judith Walkowitz has examined this subject in detail, with especial reference to the ports of Plymouth and Southampton. She found evidence of two needlewomen who actually left Plymouth because of the threat of police harassment. Miss Duffett, a seamstress

*'left after her mother's death because she had seen that there was NO SAFETY FOR A WORKING WOMAN living alone in a town where a malicious whisper, or the mere suspicion of a policeman, paid in proportion to his success in bringing up unhappy women, was sufficient legal evidence to condemn to intolerable punishment, with consequent loss of character and employment --'*⁶⁷.

The other recorded victim was

*'One milliner who actually left Plymouth because of the system of police intimidation, [who] claimed that malicious neighbours contributed to this reign of terror by threatening you "with the Water Police"'*⁶⁸.

We know about these women because they were both subsequently recruited by the LNA and went back to their home town as paid agents of the repealers. How many other needlewomen were intimidated in this way is a matter for speculation.

Maude Royden's Downward Paths of 1916 was the first semi-scientific enquiry into the causes of prostitution. She solicited case histories from magdalen homes, clergymen, social workers and the women themselves, and, using 830 of these, she constructed a thesis about the factors that drove girls to prostitute themselves. While poverty - either through loss of work or loss of the family breadwinner - was one cause, it was by no means the main one and she elicited many others. These included girls' preferring 'tangible clothes' over 'intangible chastity', and the influence of families whose moral codes were very different from those of middle class reformers. The recognition of such factors was an important breakthrough.

⁶⁶ The Acts were repealed in 1886.

⁶⁷ Op cit, Walkowitz, (1980), p.175

⁶⁸ Reported in the Shield, April 4th, 1870, quoted in op cit, Walkowitz (1980) pp.208-9

From our point of view, the most important finding is that, of her 830 prostitutes, a mere 14 had formerly worked as dressmakers and only four as milliners. Of these, she included case notes about three. 'CE' came from a bad home. Her mother drank and she therefore left home at the age of 17 and went to live with some '*undesirable*' people, through whom she met a man who pimped her, and abandoned her when she became too ill to work. 'MW' went into prostitution when she lost her job. She had come to London from the midlands to work in a West End firm, but was dismissed five months later at the end of the season and became a prostitute because, as she said '*One must live*'. 'XC' came from a respectable working class home and worked '*irregularly*' for a dressmaker's shop but lived at home. She was described as '*a spoilt, wilful, high-spirited, wild colt*'. She went to skating rinks in the evenings, and met a man who '*motored*' her to a '*house of ill fame*'. He took her to a neighbouring town for the night - she told her mother she was staying with friends. '*The man gave her a sovereign, which they spent together on sweets and skating the next day*' and her career of shame began⁶⁹.

Certainly it would seem that by the end of the 19th century, and probably before, the link between needle workers and prostitution was grossly exaggerated, and it is tempting to see in this a male fear of a woman-dominated trade. However, from the circumstantial evidence to be found in the dressmaking trade press at the end of the century it would also seem that, by the 1870s, some dressmakers were purveying abortifacients ('*Female pills*') and peddling manuals of contraceptive advice. It is possible that dressmakers had long been providing such services for their clients. Dressmakers, after all, would be among the first people to know when a woman got pregnant - her dresses and stays would need to be let out. In an all-female environment, during lengthy fittings, confidences could be exchanged and advice offered - and possibly even abortions procured. Certainly Mrs Carmichael sent Elizabeth Chaffard intimate information about one of their customers '*another confinement and another bad breast*'. Could the prejudice about dressmakers' immorality have some of its roots in that aspect of their activities⁷⁰? We can only speculate.

⁶⁹ Royden, A Maude, Downward Paths: an inquiry into the causes which contribute to the making of the Prostitute, (1916) pp.46, 108, 147 and 41-2

⁷⁰ An interview on Woman's Hour on September 23rd, 1999, with Rachel Maines (author of The Technology of the Orgasm, (Baltimore, 1999)) revealed that some dressmakers in the early 1900s used to supply vibrators to their clients!

The Children's Employment Commission of 1864

In 1864 the Children's Employment Commissioners again reported on conditions in the dressmaking trade.

Mr Pitter of the Early Closing Association was cautiously optimistic:

*'It is generally admitted that the efforts made some years ago succeeded in abolishing Sunday work, excepting so far as it might be voluntarily undertaken in a few instances by other than English females --'*⁷¹

But this improvement was limited. London houses still regularly worked 16-18 hour days in the season and most provincial firms worked 12 hour days. Some older dressmakers resented the change. Mrs Gregory of Cambray Villas in Cheltenham (interviewee 89), who had been in the trade for forty years, grumbled that when she was young *'in emergency'* she had gone a week without going to bed, but *'Now the girls complain if they have to work through one night. I think they are either much less strong than they used to be or much more idle --'*! Miss Holmes in Cherry Street in Birmingham (interviewee 63) assured the commissioners that it was a mistake to think that workers needed any protection from employers - the reverse was the case. *'No-one has any idea of the extent to which employers are dependent upon the caprices and intrigues of their assistants'*. Dissatisfied staff, she said, could leave at a month's notice (though presumably without references) and she herself blamed the *'Milliners' Institute'* in London for setting assistants against their mistresses. With employers holding attitudes like these it is not surprising that conditions in the trade had improved so very slowly.

Miss Reeves of Russell Terrace in Leamington (interviewee 102) believed that working hours were shorter in 1864 than they had been fifteen years before - but thought they were still bad and cited the case of a 'friend' in Birmingham who had worked until 4 or 5 am every night for three weeks in the run up to Christmas, and had finished at 5 am on Christmas morning. In Exeter, Mrs Treadwin's forewoman, who as an apprentice in Ipswich had regularly worked until 1 and 2 am, reported grimly that *'I call nothing late until after midnight'* (interviewee 130). But increasingly, these were the exceptions. At Edgar Buildings in the still-fashionable city of Bath the owner's sister (interviewee 110) recalled how for several days before a fancy dress ball held that Easter Monday the staff had all worked sixteen hour shifts *'which she was sure they would never forget'*. She considered anything over twelve hours excessive, while in the same city, Mrs Dunning (interviewee 111) thought a ten hour day should be the norm.

⁷¹ Children's Employment Commission (1864) Vol XIV, p.117. The foreign employees were usually known as *'French girls'* - regardless of their true nationality - and there was nothing voluntary about their employment on Sundays. The references to this report all come from this volume and can be located by the interviewees' reference numbers.

Many women who were employers in 1864 had been over-worked apprentices in 1843, and tried to spare their own staff. Miss Turner of Bertie Road in Leamington (interviewee 104) was typical. *'My own health has suffered too much from long hours to let me have anybody work late for me'*. Mrs Jones, (interviewee 122) forewoman for Mrs Matthews, Mall Buildings, Clifton, said she did all-night mourning orders very occasionally - perhaps twice a year - but when she did she gave her girls a half-day rest break the next day.

Some of this change had come about because of the growing importance of department store workrooms - where dressmaking employees were subject to much the same conditions as other store staff. In Portsea, Mr H Turner (interviewee 138) reported that his firm had taken up dressmaking within the last three years. They employed thirty people for a regular eleven hour day, in comfortable conditions, and organised occasional workers' outings to the Isle of Wight. He knew of at least two other firms in his locality that offered equally favourable conditions. It was a similar story at other big stores - at Hannington's in Brighton, at Marshall and Snelgrove in Scarborough, at Leake and Thorpe in York, at Bach and Barker's Mourning Warehouse in Birmingham or at Kendal Milne in Manchester.

Small businesses and greedy, ill-organised mistresses created the worst conditions. Mrs Faulder in St Ann's Square, Manchester insisted it was necessary *'for the hands to work long hours to give any profit'*. Her first hand, Miss Pringle confirmed that for their five month season they worked a regular 16 hour day and added *'I can safely say that during quite two months of that time we made 17 or 18 hours a day'*. Mrs Faulder was clearly a disastrous employer. Miss Pringle accused her of *'want of calculation'* and described the dreadful treatment one sixteen year old apprentice had received. The girl was given a skirt to make

'which was more than she could really do in the time, however hard she worked, and she did work hard all day; but the principal coming up and finding her behind-hand said that it was the girl's own fault and that she must take half an hour from her dinner time ---'

The poor girl did not finish it until 11 pm, even though Miss Pringle helped her for the last hour⁷².

Many of the criticisms of the commissioners' methodology in the 1843 enquiry also apply to the 1864 one. However, there was more consistency in the questioning of interviewees. The commissioners concentrated on three aspects of working conditions - long hours and whether these had improved since

⁷² Mrs Faulder was interviewee no 2, Miss Pringle was no 3.

1843, wages, and conditions in workrooms. The 1843 report and the enquiries following on the death of Mary Ann Walkley had revealed that workrooms were often stuffy and ill ventilated, many of them were basement rooms where the heat and smell from gas lighting was often a problem. So anxious were the commissioners to deal with this situation that the report includes three pages of recommendations - effectively advertisements, complete with diagrams, for four named ventilation systems⁷³!

Novels of the 1870s and 80s

By the 1870s novels began to present a more positive picture of the dressmaking profession. In Nellie Graham the Young Dressmaker (1874) C.R. Doggett's objections to the trade are purely moral. Nellie is anxious to become a dressmaker and her parents support her, but her Aunt Rachael, crippled (and therefore made wise by suffering) opposes her plan, believing that Nellie would be better off in service. Nonetheless, Nellie becomes a live-in apprentice to a dressmaker in a local town. She shares a bedroom with two sisters, Sophy and Esther, daughters of a local draper, who are learning the trade so that they can work for their father. They are sewing machinists - in this context the sewing machine represents modernity and the antithesis of traditional values. In case this is not clear enough, Doggett has the girls tease Nellie because she says her prayers. Eventually they all become friends and Esther and Sophy persuade Nellie to make a flimsy ball gown to attend a dance their father is organising. The gown tears the first time she wears it, and Nellie is left with a garment she is ashamed to own - presumably dancing was too frivolous an occupation for Doggett to condone - and a debt to her former friends for the fabric. She works hard to pay off the money and then returns home to marry a good and worthy man, bitterly regretting that she did not heed her aunt's advice.

*"Ah" she would say to herself when at a loss in contriving a tempting dinner for her husband "dear Aunty's words have come true! If I had gone into service, I should have known how to do everything; instead of having to learn now ---. There's one comfort, I can make my own, and baby's clothes; and if bad times should come, or business be dull, - I can turn to my dressmaking again. That will find food for my dear ones, though I am rather stupid at cooking it --- "*⁷⁴.

⁷³ They were the Ordnance System, Arnot's Changing Ventilator, Watson's Self-acting Siphon Ventilator and De La Garde's Gaslight Ventilator. There were descriptions and illustrations on pp. lxi to lxiii and more illustrations on pp.235-7

⁷⁴ Op cit, Doggett, (1874) pp.83 -84

But Doggett's views were outdated. In Dressmaker to the Queen by H J Brooke Houston, published just five years after Nellie Graham, dressmaking is the salvation of two women. Jennie, a farmer's daughter, is apprenticed to a Mrs Dysart. She runs a modern establishment.

*'Twenty girls were at work in a large, scantily furnished room, and the whirr of sewing machines and the rustle of silken garments was the only sound to be heard --- Madame was not a very severe mistress; she did not drive her apprentices cruelly, nor half starve them, nor did she expect impossibilities ---'*⁷⁵

Jennie shows considerable flair for design and is taken on as a partner. *'It was a very nice amusement to stand before a lay figure and pull a dress about until it hung prettily ---'*⁷⁶ Lay figures, like sewing machines, were new in the 1870s. Jennie also found work for her widowed mother who was no longer welcome in their old home because her son had taken a wife. Jennie's mother becomes housekeeper to the establishment and transforms it.

*'The apprentice's garret was no longer the cheerless place it used to be. A few bright flowers stood on the window sill; fresh muslin curtains shut out the glaring sunlight; several pretty illuminations made spots of cheerful colour on the walls, and a piece of Indian matting covered the middle of the floor, instead of the faded, dusty piece of drugget ---'*⁷⁷

In Grace Myers' Sewing Machine (1872) T S Arthur considered the provision of sewing machines to enable women to earn their own livings to be a positive benefit, and his male characters establish '*The Fairfield Sewing Machine Temperance Society*' and save the money they would otherwise have spent on beer for this purpose.

By 1870 a pamphlet produced for Davis, the sewing machine manufacturer, could actually satirise the idea of the struggling gentlewoman-seamstress. For ten pages the heroine, Rosalie Thornton, followed a well-worn path - rejection by her social equals, separation from her aristocratic admirer and a painful struggle to earn a living. But Rosalie's problems came about only because she had chosen the wrong sort of sewing machine and '*a Spartan-like patience was required to conquer the innumerable difficulties it presented to a learner ---*'. The booklet was entitled Without a Penny in the World: A Story

⁷⁵ Houston, H J Brooke, Dressmaker to the Queen (1879) p.19

⁷⁶ Ibid p.25

⁷⁷ Ibid p.30

of the Period and the 'Period' was in fact the brand of sewing machine which solved all her problems - including re-uniting her with her lover! *'No trouble is required to learn it; it makes a beautiful lock stitch --- and the worker of it is certain of constant employment'!*⁷⁸ (Plates 7 a and b)

Finally, a novel by Sarah Tytler, Girl Neighbours, published in 1888, presents dressmaking in a completely new light. Two girls, Pie and Harriet, from very different social backgrounds, eventually become friends. During a smallpox epidemic, a nurse, Emily Brandon, comes to their village to look after Harriet who has contracted the illness. Miss Brandon comes from a respectable family, but both she and her two sisters earn their own livings, a fact that impresses Pie and Harriet enormously, to the extent that they persuade their parents to send them away to college, together, so that they, too, can become independent. One of Miss Brandon's sisters taught cookery; the other taught '*scientific dressmaking*' and went '*about the world, teaching the trade on scientific principals to village dressmakers and their apprentices, and to sewing classes in schools.*' --⁷⁹.

From being an occupation which, in the 1840s, was seen to exploit its employees and put their health and morals at risk, by the 1880s dressmaking was rehabilitated in literature as a modern career offering opportunities for respectable, independent young women. There were indeed opportunities for educated young women like the fictional Miss Brandon's sister, and as we shall see in chapter five, some women were able to turn their dressmaking skills to good account. By the 1890s milliners were actually being cited as examples of how women working in groups could remain feminine and untainted by the world of work.

*'As it is, numbers of young women are gathered together in the workrooms of milliners and of drapers, who do their work, and generally in the end marry and settle down in their own homes, not necessarily injured by their businesslife'*⁸⁰

wrote one exponent of the idea that women should band together in workrooms to create and sell craft work..

⁷⁸ Keats, Chatterton, Without a Penny in the World (1870) pp. 9-10

⁷⁹ Tytler, Sarah, Girl Neighbours (1888) p.311. See chapter 5, pp.217-223 for more information on scientific dressmaking.

⁸⁰ Op cit, Attfield and Kirkham, (1989) p.161

Social surveys 1880-1914

Life, however, did not always imitate art. For dressmakers working in the new workrooms in big department stores, conditions were usually tolerable. There was some regulation of hours, wages were relatively good and enough staff were employed to deal with the workload. But the late 1870s had seen one of the worst depressions in British history as Germany and the US became industrial powers and challenged Britain's supremacy. Poor harvests drove country people to the towns and waves of Jewish immigrants arrived fleeing pogroms in Eastern Europe. The towns were already overcrowded, and under the twin pressures of an oversubscribed labour market and foreign competition, employers reduced wages. Seamstresses and many dressmakers were badly affected.

The 1880s saw a new round of official enquiries in response to deteriorating conditions. The Women's Trade Union League reported on sweated industries in the East End in 1884. The Jewish Board of Guardians produced a survey, as did John Burnet for the Board of Trade and Factory Inspector Lakeman for the Home Office. A Royal Commission on working class housing reported in 1884 and a House of Lords Committee on Sweating was set up in 1888. As a result, Factory and Workshop Acts in 1891 and 1895 attempted to extend factory legislation to cover workshops, and to place responsibility for inspection with local authorities. However, the legislation was patchily enforced, it was expensive and there were considerable discrepancies in the way in which the law was interpreted. Just as work had moved from factory to workshop when factory legislation began to take effect, improvements in workshop legislation led to an increase in home work after 1900⁸¹.

Meanwhile, some members of the middle class were experiencing pangs of social conscience: -

'-- a new consciousness of sin among men of intellect and men of property -- a growing uneasiness amounting to a conviction, that the industrial organisation, which had yielded rent, interest and profits on a stupendous scale, had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain'

was how Beatrice Webb described it in her autobiography⁸². She, with her husband, Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw, H G Wells, Clement Attlee and other like-minded socialists were members of

⁸¹ For a fuller discussion of legislation relating to the clothing trade in this period, see Schmiechen, James 'State Reform and the Local Economy; an aspect of industrialization in late Victorian and Edwardian London' Economic History Review XXVIII (1975) and, by the same author, Sweated Industry and Sweated Labour. The London Clothing Trades 1860-1914 (1984)

⁸² Potter, Beatrice, My Apprenticeship (1926) pp.173-4

the Fabian Society, founded in 1884. They believed that socialism was inevitable but should not be pursued by revolutionary means, and advocated gradual reform of social conditions.

Beatrice Webb was well aware of just how badly this reform was needed. She was the cousin of Mary Macaulay (daughter of the historian), who married Charles Booth in 1871. Charles Booth was wealthy, a partner in a Liverpool ship-owning firm, but he had an interest in radical politics and became fascinated by the problems of urban poverty after he moved to London in 1875. He had a somewhat eccentric interest in the slums and enjoyed walking through the East End, observing the inhabitants with almost anthropological curiosity. He even spent some time in rooms he rented there. *'He likes the life and the people and the evening roaming - and the food! which he says agrees with him in kind and time of taking better than that of our class'* wrote his wife⁸³. In 1886 Booth's interest led him to attempt a proper survey of slum conditions and he recruited a group of volunteers, one of the most dedicated of whom was Beatrice Webb, then Beatrice Potter. Clara Collet, who in 1893 became the first female Labour Correspondent of the Board of Trade, was another who served her apprenticeship in social investigation under Charles Booth. The result of their enquiries was an enormous seventeen volume series The Life and Labour of the People of London, the first volume of which appeared in 1889.

Other authors produced works of a similar genre, the most successful of which was probably The Bitter Cry of Outcast London (1883), published by the London Congregational Union. Similar surveys were carried out in the provinces. In Leicester, the Unitarians set up a Domestic Mission, under Joseph Dare, which produced annual reports between 1846 and 1877. Sometimes the local press took the initiative - the Liverpool Review, for example, published a series of interviews with women workers in the clothing trades in the latter part of 1887. In York in the 1890s Seebohm Rowntree supervised the survey of the city's poor which was to be published in 1901 as Poverty: a Study of Town Life - an attempt to discover whether the conditions Booth had uncovered in the East End were replicated in the provinces. They were. Booth's reports were exceptional in that, unlike more sensationalist reporters, he established a formal method of mapping and visiting, an impersonal style of recording, and, most important of all, he attempted to define a 'poverty line' below which a family could be considered impoverished⁸⁴.

⁸³ Fried, Albert and Elman, Richard, (eds) Charles Booth's London, (1969) p.21

⁸⁴ See chapter three, p.129

At about the same time, the particular problems of women's work came under the spotlight. Women's status was gradually beginning to change; the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 gave some limited protection to abused wives, the Married Women's Act of 1882 entitled deserted wives to maintenance, the Married Women's Property Act was passed in 1884 and the Guardianship of Infants Act in 1886. Some women were gaining access to university education in the 1850s and 60s⁸⁵. Other women were attending art schools and training colleges and becoming teachers and writers. New careers - nursing, secretarial work, social work - opened up to them. The Central Committee for Women's Suffrage was formed in 1872 after some years of agitation. The Women's Trade Union League was formed in 1874 to encourage women to form, or join, unions. It had little effect on working conditions, partly because, though women were prepared to join unions, they seldom stayed in them. Intelligent, concerned women - mostly from the middle classes - formed other pressure groups to fight for social and political rights for themselves and their less fortunate sisters. These included the National Union of Women Workers (1874), the Women's Protective and Provident League (1873-4) which became the Women's Trade Union League in 1891, the Women's Co-operative Guild (1883), the Anti-Sweating League (c.1887), the Women's Industrial Council (1894), the Women's Labour League (1906), and the Fabian Women's Group (1908). The impetus for change thus came from groups that were largely middle class, and though well meaning, did not always fully understand the problems they were trying to solve. However, most of the groups were committed to '*special and systematic inquiry into the conditions of working women*' (as Clementina Black described it to the inaugural meeting of the Women's Industrial Council in 1894) and it is the results of these enquiries that give us some insight into the lives of women at the lower end of the dressmaking trade in the period before the First World War. A feature of most of these surveys is that they are very personal, consisting of individual accounts of experiences and hardships, and describing the grinding reality of low wages.

Lady Adele Meyer and Clementina Black published The Makers of Our Clothes in 1909, the results of a survey done in London in 1908, to argue for the establishment of Trade Boards in the clothing industry. They were therefore largely concerned with wages and those findings are reproduced in chapter four, but they also reported on firms whose working practices they approved. One employer they admired had operated a system of fines for late arrivals and rewards for punctuality (paid out of the fines) and found that it sorted out the girls who really needed money from the ones who were comfortably off. She also

⁸⁵ Queen's college, London opened in 1848 and Bedford college in 1849. Girton college moved from Hitchin to Cambridge in 1869. Newnham was established in 1870. Oxford's Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville were founded in 1878 and 1879.

claimed to keep on in slack times those girls who most needed work and to ensure that they were the ones who were sent to work for ladies in the country. Another establishment which was '*most admirably arranged and managed*' offered prizes for punctuality and tidy hair (!) and they were particularly impressed that the employer provided black ribbons for tying back the hair of the younger girls. Working hours were nominally 8.55 to 8 but this firm usually finished at 7.30; full hands earned at least 18s, the employer was a woman '*of education and culture*' who inculcated '*good, quiet manners*' and '*refined appearance*' in her workers. '[We] were impressed by the immense opportunities for good which a factory or work-room affords to an educated and enlightened woman who genuinely cares about the workers'⁸⁶. Despite their familiarity with working class life Lady Meyer and Miss Black betrayed many of the prejudices of their class.

A collection of letters from Co-operative guildswomen was edited by Margaret Llewellyn Davies and published in 1930 under the title Life as we have known it. Her correspondents were asked to describe their early working lives and how Guild membership had improved things for them. One lady, born in Cefyn Mawr in Wales in 1858 was one of the five children of a shoemaker father and a mother '*who went out day sewing for 1s a day*' to supplement her husband's 12s a week wage. Presumably she worked for private clients, going to their homes to make and mend. This correspondent went into service at the age of nine, and after a series of jobs, worked in a Temperance Hotel in Oldham where her employers sent her, aged 14, to night school to learn to read and write. In 1880 she married a platelayer on the railway who earned 18s a week. He kept 2s for his own needs and paid 7d to a Provident Club. His wife was left with 15s-5d from which to pay 2s-8d rent, 1s-4d for coal and 6d for lamp oil, leaving just 10s-11d for food and clothes. '*I did a little plain sewing to help us during the week to keep out of debt. We struggled along to get a nice home together with my little sewing money*'.

Within a few months she was pregnant and

*'to prepare for that time, I took more sewing in, and worked night and day to save a little --- Just a week before my baby came, I made eight print, tight-fitting jackets for 1s-4d each --- I had to suffer for it after. I went about with a little pillow under each arm for three months with gathered breasts ---'*⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Meyer, Lady Adele and Black, Clementina, Makers of Our Clothes: a Case for Trade Boards (1909) pp. 85-6

⁸⁷ Davies, Margaret Llewellyn, Life as we have known it (1977 Virago edition) p.61

The fact that she made eight similar jackets suggests that by this point she was working for a ready-made clothing firm rather than as a dressmaker but her story demonstrates the physical problems overwork at sewing (probably machining) could cause.

Thirteen women who did work as private dressmakers appear in Clementina Black's Married Women's Work (1915) were interviewed in 1909-10 for the Women's Industrial Council⁸⁸. They included a woman who had been a 'tea gown hand' in the West End and whose average earnings were about 12s a week, while another woman and her mother earned 15s to 30s between them. But 'Mrs B', aged 32 and the mother of six children (and of five others who had died) lived in two basement rooms and let a third, had a consumptive rag-and-bone man husband, and did any jobs she could as well as dressmaking - charring, washing, flower selling - while her 14 year old minded the younger children. An older woman, 'over 50', made blouses, and considered her best customer a fruiterer's wife who paid 1s-6d for fancy blouses, unlike most of her other customers who paid 6d to 9d. These were all women who were in business on their own account but whose wages were no better than those of dressmakers' employees. Their conditions were worse, too, in that they all had families to care for, and had to pay for their own food, fuel and lighting. They were all dressmaking for their working class neighbours and were probably typical of many girls who had some training, were not particularly talented, but found themselves married to men whose wages were inadequate to their family's needs. They all described themselves as 'dressmakers' but their pay and conditions were very similar to those of slop workers (seamstresses) described in the same report. The conclusion drawn from this limited survey was *'that a woman has not a chance of earning what she would call "good money" if she works at a trade that she has not learned properly in her early years'*. It was not the whole story.

The Daily News, owned by the Quaker, Cadbury, held an exhibition of work produced by sweated workers in May, 1906. Visitors were attracted by lectures given by celebrities like Will Crookes the MP and George Bernard Shaw. Shaw attacked his audience with vehemence

'I see you are not interested in sweating but you are interested in me. That may be very flattering to me, but it is characteristic of the present day. If you all felt very strongly on the subject of sweating you wouldn't be listening to me today. You would be out in the

⁸⁸ I have used the 1983 Virago edition. See pp.86-90

streets, burning people, burning houses and generally upsetting the whole social system.
---⁸⁹

Mary Neal wrote the article on sweated dressmakers in the exhibition catalogue. While acknowledging that the trade had different branches she concentrated on the West End. She found that a hand earned, on average, 14s a week throughout the year.

*'She will never earn more, because, unless a girl is exceptionally lucky in becoming a fitter or first hand, she reaches her maximum wage-earning capacity when quite young, and before a year or two is over she earns less sooner than more each time she changes her place'*⁹⁰.

She criticised the fact that girls were taught just one branch of the trade, and if they wanted to learn other skills they had to move from job to job as improvers. Clearly, this must have hampered the provincial apprentice who came to the capital to gain experience with a view to setting up in business herself back home. She also criticised the unhealthy conditions in the trade which created '*bent backs and anaemic blood*', and, in tune with her age and class, the dangers of exposing young working girls to '*display and luxury*'. The exhibition attracted 30,000 visitors and 20,000 catalogues were sold - and conditions in the sweated trades continued unchanged.

Conclusion

The 19th century evidence is thus diverse and sometimes contradictory but the overall impression it leaves is that needlewomen of all kinds were downtrodden, underprivileged and often immoral. Some modern feminist historians - like Rozsika Parker - have thus come to see needlework, of whatever kind, almost as a symbol of women's subservience⁹¹.

This is not entirely inaccurate but it is over-simplistic. It is important to realise that the 'needle trades' covered a wide range of occupations within which there was a definite hierarchy. Milliners and dressmakers were at the top, arranged by the class of firm that employed them, and the level of training the individual had received. The various grades of seamstress were at the bottom, arranged more by how much they were paid and how regularly they were employed than by who employed them - though

⁸⁹ Quoted in Stewart, M and Hunter, L, The Needle is Threaded, (1964) pp.136-137

⁹⁰ Smith, R M, Handbook of the Daily News exhibition, (May 1906) pp.55-57

⁹¹ Parker, Rozsika, The Subversive Stitch (1984)

working for a shop was slightly preferable to working for a manufacturer and working for a client was better than either. There was some mobility - mostly downward - within the trades. A girl who had trained as a dressmaker would have been able to work as a seamstress, though few seamstresses would have been able to get jobs as dressmakers.

Most women in all branches of the needle trades were poorly paid, and there is no doubt that they worked exceptionally long hours, even by 19th century standards. But dressmaking offered the possibility of advancement. The head of a workroom was an important person with considerable skill and responsibility. Such women were comparatively well paid, as we shall see in chapter four. Women who completed their training and could raise a little capital could go into business on their own account, and, if they were lucky or talented and had a good head for business, they could make a respectable living. In her catalogue of abuse and exploitation in the London court dressmaking trade, Christina Walkley fails to explain that this was the reason so many young women were prepared to submit to appalling conditions. Experience in a London 'house' was a key factor in attracting customers when a dressmaker set up in business on her own account. Dressmaking was, in fact, one of the few trades that allowed women to take control of their destiny. The next chapter will investigate some women who managed to do just that.



Plate 5. Illustration from *Galerie des Modes*, (1778) showing a dressmaker carrying a pair of panniers and her apprentice with a bundle of clothing in her apron. The dressmaker's clothes are in the height of fashion. She wears a taffeta robe and a green apron. Her hair is fashionably dressed and she has a '*bonnet a la crete de coq*'. Even her apprentice is stylishly clad and wears a fashionable bonnet. These were the sort of women who figured in contemporary literature.



MAY'S ARRIVAL AT MRS. BROWNE'S. Page 30.

Plates 6 a and b.
Illustrations from May Coverley, the Young Dressmaker, published by the Religious Tract Society, (1860)



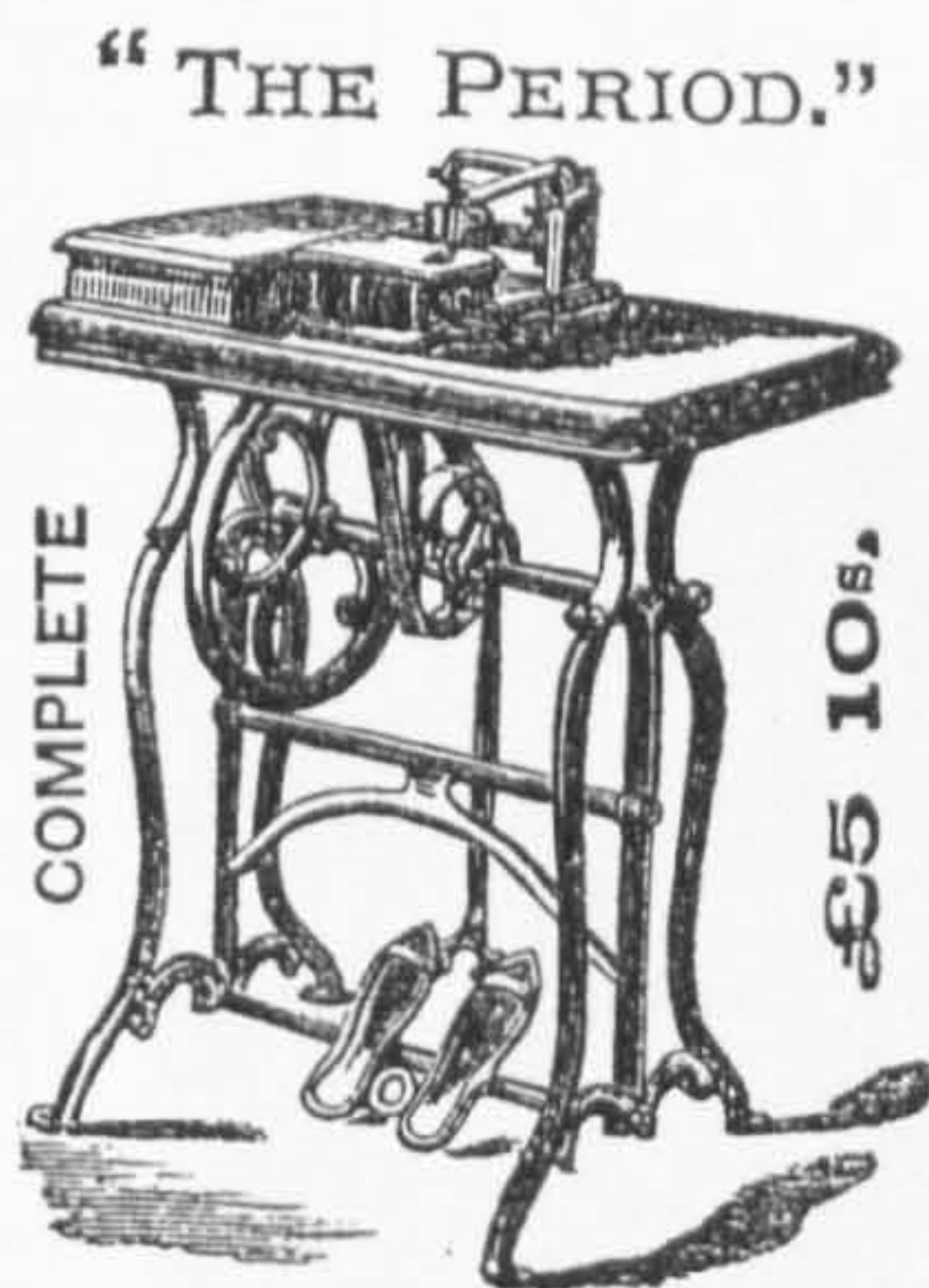
THE LONDON DRESSMAKERS. Page 184.

REDUCED TO £5 10s.

CAN BE PAID FOR WEEKLY BY INSTALMENTS TO SUIT CONVENIENCE

Instructions
Free.

Samples of Work
and
Testimonials
sent by Post.



The "PERIOD" will
Gather,
Hem,
Quilt,
Tuck,
Braid,
Bind,

And in fact do all kinds of Fancy Sewing, from the finest Muslin to the stoutest Cloth.

Plates 7 a and b

Illustration and verse which accompanied Without a Penny in the World: A Tale of the Period (1870), a story which advertised the 'Period' sewing machine produced by S Davis of 8, Hackney Road, London

S ome time ago there lived, no matter when or where,
E mma and Edwin, a most true and loving pair ;
W orried they were in being so very poor and sad,
I n fact were next to starving, and he nearly mad,
N o work for him ; he tried, they all said " No ; "
" G ood Heavens, Emma," he cried, " to the Union we must go ! "
M rs. Jones, a good neighbour, exclaimed " the Union do not seek,
A s I know how Emma can earn 30s. per week ;
C all at S. DAVIS'S, 8, Hackney Road, near Shoreditch,
H e will let you have a Sewing Machine called the ' Lock-stitch,'
I ts price is only £5 10s., warranted with every requisite complete,
N o money is wanted, he takes it at so much per week."
E mma went and had Lessons until proficient—free,
S he now earns enough to live happily, through S. D.

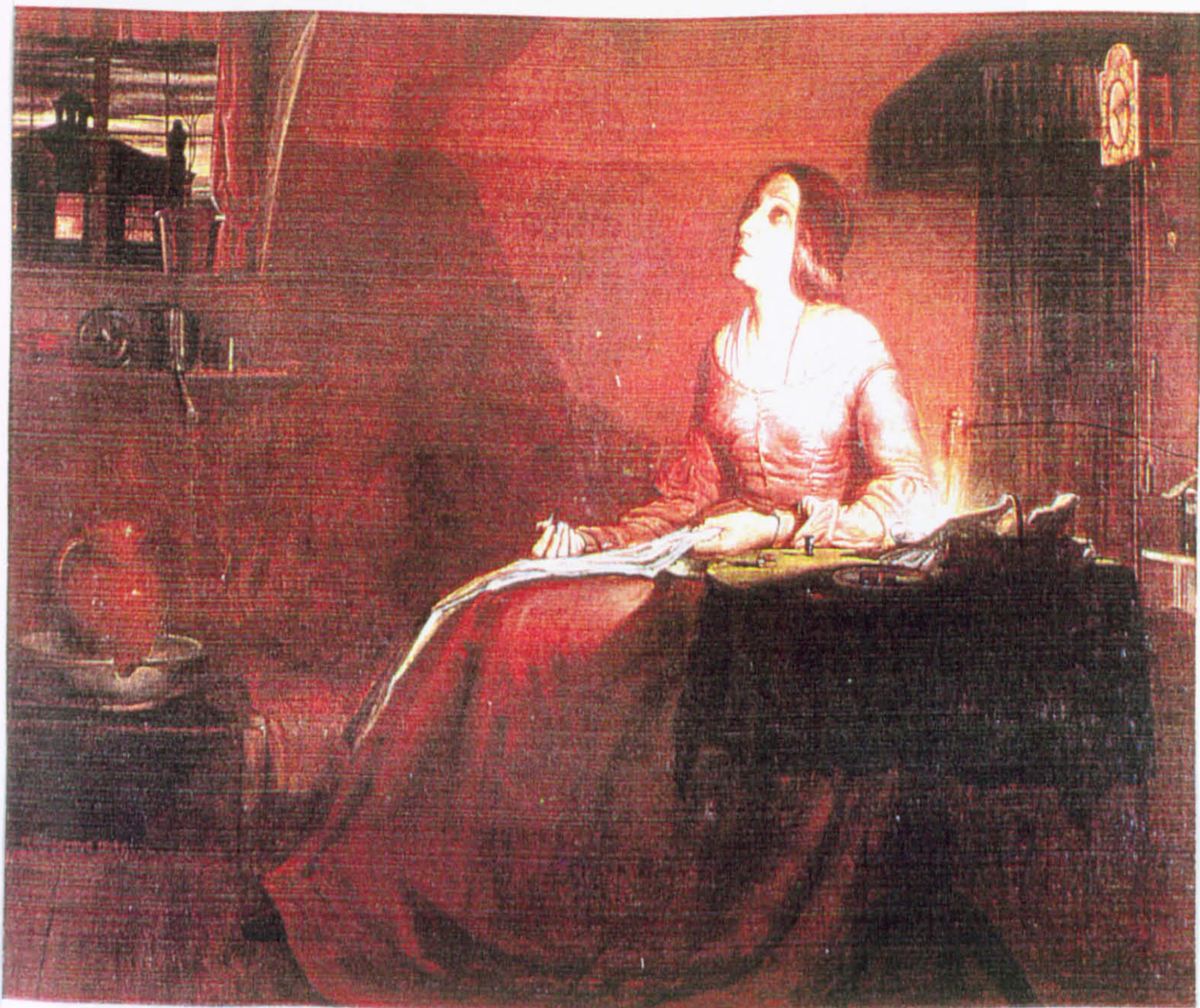


Plate 8. *'The Sempstress'* by Richard Redgrave, 1846

Plate 9. *'Fashion's Slaves'* by Richard Redgrave, 1847





Plate 10.
*'The Song of the
 shirt'*
 by G.F. Watts,
 c.1848-50

Plate 11. *'For only
 one short hour'*
(Song of the Shirt)
 by Anna Blunden,
 1854

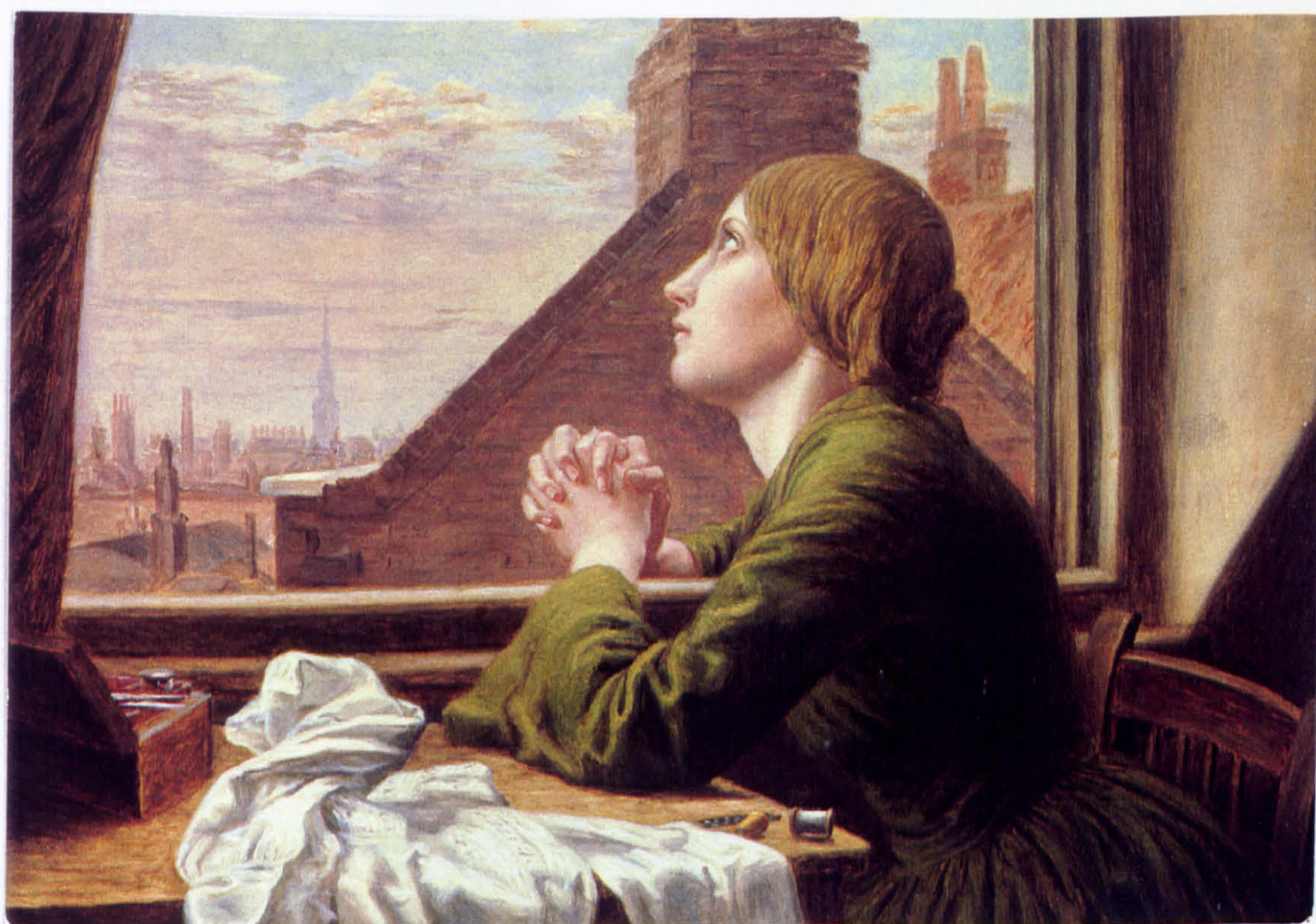




Plate 12. *'The Song of the Shirt'* by Frank Holl, undated but c.1860

Plate 13. *'Snowdrops'* by George Elgar Hicks, 1858





Plate 14. '*Stitch! Stitch! Stitch!*'
by Millais, 1876

Plate 15.
'*The Needlewoman*'
by Thomas Mildmay,
undated

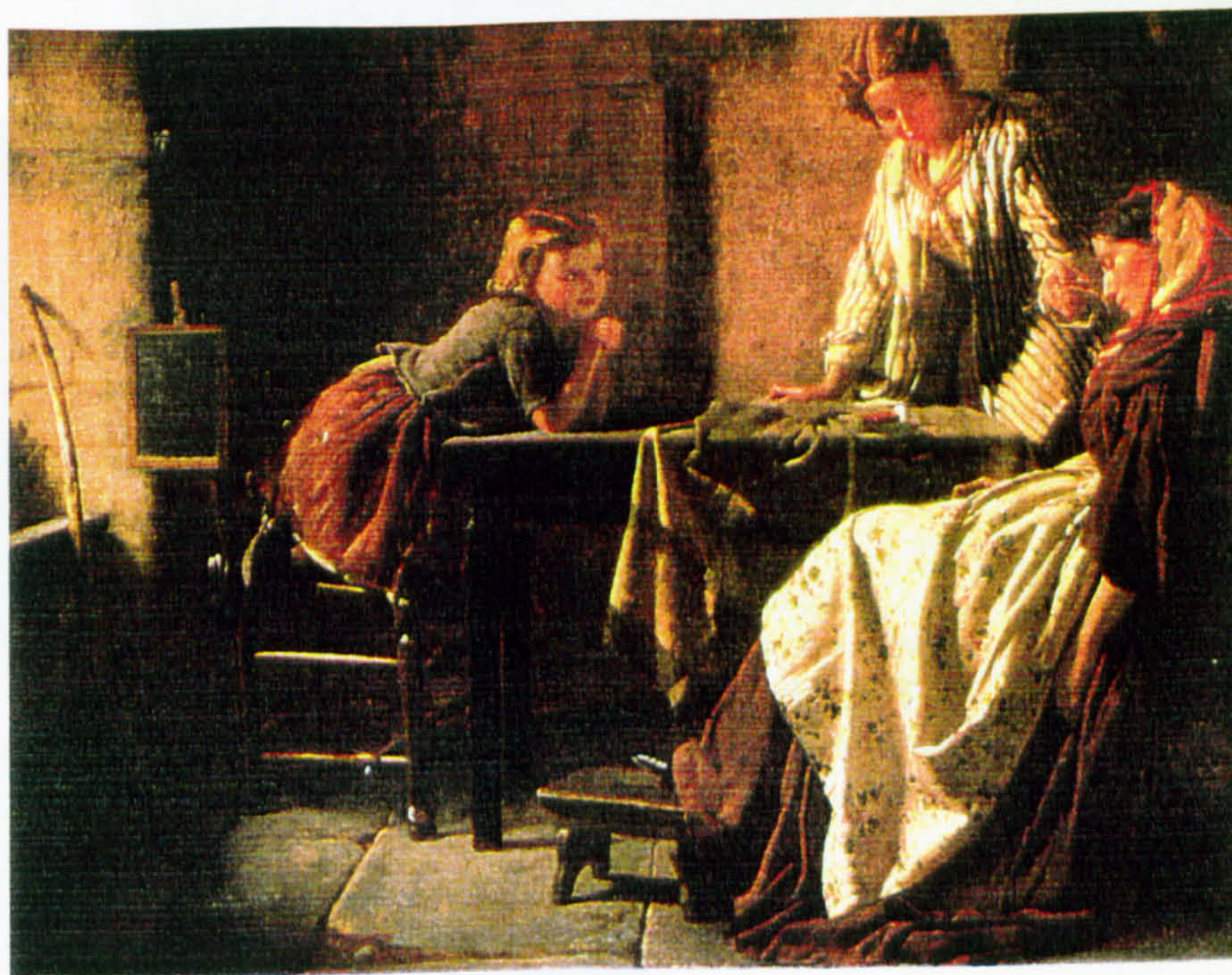




Plate 16.

*'It is not your linen
you're wearing out
But human
creatures' lives'* by
Claude Andrew
Calthrop, 1891

Plate 17.

'Adversity' by
Thomas Benjamin
Kennington, 1890



Plate 18

'Weary' by Edward
Radford, c.1887
(Russell Cotes Gallery)

Chapter two

The structure of the trade - dressmakers' records

'In matters of business, follow the advice of those who know them better than yourselves, and in whose integrity you can confide' (John Gregory A Father's Legacy to his Daughters, 1774)

There were literally thousands of dressmaking firms in Britain in the 19th century, and most of them were run by women who were quite capable of dealing with '*matters of business*'. Unfortunately, only a handful have left any records behind them. These documents appear in record offices and local history libraries all over the country, and most of this is unpublished material. It relates to businesses as far apart as Edinburgh and Helston, and to firms that catered for countesses and others that provided print dresses for servant girls. The sample is small and the records that remain are not consistent - a day book here, some family letters there, a book of references, some bills, an odd wages book. They provide snapshots of different people and different aspects of the trade in different parts of the country at different dates. It would be capricious to ignore this material, but as there is no way of knowing how typical any particular record is, it all has to be treated with caution.

Nonetheless, this chapter will use this material, together with other evidence, in an attempt to create a picture of the dressmaking trade in the 19th century. As we noted in the Introduction, there was a clear watershed in the development of the trade in the 1870s, and this will be discussed later. Consequently, though some data from the latter part of the period will be examined here, the main analysis of the trade post-1870 will appear in chapters four and five.

This study covers a long period which saw many changes. In 1780 London was the undisputed centre of the country, with a population of over a million; a fashionable city of great shops, showrooms, theatres and pleasure gardens, but also home to a large, brutalised, ignorant, gin-drinking, slum-bred working class. But the country beyond the capital was beginning to open up. The canal network was being built and it was becoming possible to move bulky goods the length and breadth of the country - the first pre-requisite for establishing a national market. Nonetheless, some areas were still all but inaccessible in the winter months. From 1706 turnpike trusts sought to make a profit for their investors by improving the road network, and by 1750 most of the main routes were controlled in this way. Regular coach and carrier services developed. In 1840 Rowland Hill introduced the pre-paid penny post, facilitating communication between

¹ See Introduction, footnote 1 and chapter seven for details to substantiate this claim

different parts of the kingdom and reducing the cost of sending a single page letter from London to Edinburgh by 94%². In 1815, Stamp Tax, which had been levied on newspapers and pamphlets since 1712, stood at 4d a copy. This was reduced to 1d in 1836 and was abolished in 1855. Many new local and national newspapers and magazines were published, including a number specifically for women. Telegraphic communication proliferated in the 1850s. Reuters was established in 1859 and the first viable transatlantic cable was laid in 1866. By 1880 the railway network stretched from the north of Scotland to Truro, bringing in its wake a standard national system of time-keeping and goods from all over the nation and empire. Many working people now made an annual visit to the seaside, and Thomas Cook had brought the foreign holiday within reach of the middle classes. The Great Exhibition of 1851 had been, among other things, the first national tourist attraction, fostering a sense of national pride and showing artisans from Darlington to Dover what industrial power could achieve. The world was shrinking. Information, including information about fashion, had never been more accessible.

But these achievements had their price. Massive population growth, industrialisation and demographic change posed problems that no other age or nation had had to deal with, and they came about within two generations. In 1851 half the British population lived in towns, and over the next fifty years that proportion rose to three-quarters. This removed many people from their traditional networks of support - family, neighbours and parish. Townspeople had few resources against starvation - there was no cottage garden, hedgerow or illegal game to be had in a city slum. The poorest sectors of the populace became almost invisible to respectable people who did not venture into the rookeries and alley ways behind the main town thoroughfares. It is not surprising that, faced with an unprecedented problem, government took so long to recognise it for what it was and even longer to do anything about it.

The 19th century saw the development of a thriving bourgeoisie. This class was larger than the old aristocracy and at least as important. It provided employers and senior employees, created standards of morality and behaviour and defined rules of etiquette. It was Christian and bigoted, charitable and thrifty, complacent and curious, well-read and ignorant. What is most important here, however, is that its womenfolk were much concerned with dress, outward appearances and 'correct' behaviour. Etiquette required them to have more clothes than ever before and caused a whole industry to spring up to cater for just one ritual - that of mourning the dead. There was a huge market for dressmakers' services.

² Baker, Charles Arnold, The Companion to British History, (1996), p.1025

The dresses they were required to make changed decade by decade, and, towards the end of our period, almost year by year. Dressmakers in the 1790s had to get used to making soft muslin dresses after almost a century of stiff, lined and interlined silks. In the 1800s these soft, flowing dresses became columnar, in faint imitation of what fashion designers believed had been worn by the wives and daughters of Roman senators. In the 1820s and 30s dresses became fuller, with large sleeves and low necks, a romantic interpretation of 16th and 17th century dress inspired in part by the novels of Walter Scott and the operas of Donizetti. By the 1840s, bodices and sleeves were tighter and more demure, but skirts, for the next two decades became fuller and fuller, spreading out over crinoline cages and increasing layers of voluminous cotton underwear. In the 1870s first the crinolette and then the bustle replaced the crinoline, and in response to the arrival of the sewing machine, garments became more and more elaborately trimmed, especially about the skirt. Shapes veered from full to fitted to voluminously draped to flared to softly draped and columnar.

It is against this background that the records of dressmaking businesses must be read. I will examine these records under various headings, and within each section those firms which supply a considerable amount of data will be treated as separate case studies. This makes for a rather fragmented approach but it seemed the most complete way of treating a miscellaneous collection of material.

Training

Perhaps because there was no guild background to the trade, or perhaps because it was a women's occupation and relatively informal, many dressmakers seem to have learnt their business without a formal apprenticeship.

Charity children and orphans of respectable family were often the exceptions. For instance, there is an indenture in the Dorset Record Office for the apprenticeship of Sarah Strong Talbot '*now about the age off [sic] Seventeen years*' of Corfe Castle, to Emma Elgar of Dorchester, in July 1845. Her guardian, James Kent '*gentleman*', paid a £40 premium, and the term of the apprenticeship was 3 years, during which time Emma Elgar was to prevent Sarah playing cards, dice '*or any other unlawful Games*', frequenting taverns and theatres or going anywhere by herself without permission³. A codicil added that James Kent would also find Sarah's clothes, washing and medical expenses. The indenture alone cost £2-

³ Typical provisions in 19th century apprenticeship indentures.

0s-6d to draw up. It was an expensive undertaking and one which few families would have been able to afford⁴.

The 1843 Children's Employment Commission highlighted the discrepancies between apprenticeship customs in different parts of the country. For example, interviewee number 237 in Bristol was six years into a seven year apprenticeship for which no premium had been charged. Number 257 said that the usual length for an apprenticeship in Bath was five years, while in Norwich one or two year apprenticeships were said to be the norm. The premiums charged also varied widely. Mayhew estimated in 1849 that London apprenticeship premiums varied between £10 and £50, and cited the case of '*a third rate house in the suburbs*' where the proprietress actually set up in business on the proceeds of the premiums she received - £110 from four apprentices at £20 each and three improvers at £10 each⁵.

By 1864 the Children's Employment Commission found that most apprenticeships were shorter and cheaper but that conditions varied widely. Miss Thomas (interviewee 90) who ran a business on the Promenade at Cheltenham complained rather haughtily that many girls were taken on, without premiums, as out-apprentices '*by persons in a small way of business*'. She also felt that fewer '*respectably-connected*' girls entered the trade than had done in the past⁶. In Bath, interviewee 113 reported that two year apprenticeships were now usual and that premiums were small or non-existent - though Mrs Crowden of the Blue Coat School (116) still paid £3 for three year apprenticeships for her girls. In Exeter, Mrs Brothers (125) charged £3 to £5 for a three year apprenticeship, though Mrs Brown (132) claimed that high-class apprentices still paid £25- £30. In Plymouth, Mrs Radford charged a £5 premium to her out-apprentices for a three year term. However, in Ryde, Miss L (141) charged a £30 premium for three years, and in 1864 she had six live-in apprentices and 3 or 4 outdoor ones, so she was still making good money from training girls.

⁴ Dorset RO D1369:A14/1/19. James Kent of Corfe Castle is listed as '*farmer*' in the 1840s directories.

⁵ Op cit, Yeo and Thompson, (1971) pp.529-530

⁶ This is **not** the conclusion that I draw from the census evidence discussed in chapter seven

On the other hand, Frances Hicks⁷ claimed that a £20 premium was still the norm for an apprenticeship in the 1890s at one of the 'Madame' shops she described to Margaret Stewart and Leslie Hunter. Apprentices in such businesses usually worked for six to twelve months unpaid, then for another twelve months for a nominal 2s or 2s-6d a week, before becoming a 'season hand' in the West End.⁸ But they were unusual. Apprenticeship indentures do survive for milliners and dressmakers from the latter part of the 19th century, but they are few and far between⁹. Fewer and fewer trades offered formal apprenticeships for girls as the 19th century progressed. Even in dressmaking, girls seem to have been taken on as 'apprentices' without indentures, and, by the latter part of the century, many firms did not charge premiums either.

Women who were apprenticed in the early years of the 20th century have left descriptions of what they did. Picking up pins and filling pin cushions feature largely, as does threading needles, stitching on brush braid, making strap holders for evening dresses and running endless errands. Apprentices were often kept at one task to maintain secrecy and prevent the girls learning too much¹⁰.

Alice Maud Chase of Portsmouth was apprenticed in 1895 and remained in the trade for eight years, hating almost all of it. She worked a 57 ½ hour week:-

' --to girls like myself who were shut up in one room from 8.30am to 8pm, the world was just one dreary round of tacking, stitching, pressing, oversewing, boning and trimming, over and over again, being bullied and harried and insulted by over-bearing and ill-tempered task mistresses, that we all grew pale, round-shouldered, dull-eyed and depressed ---'¹¹.

⁷ Secretary of the Tailoress's Union. Frances Hicks was active in the movement to unionise garment making from c.1894. She was secretary of the London Tailoresses - part of the London Tailors and Tailoresses who formed a separate breakaway union in 1905, and of the Women's Trade Union Association.

⁸ Op cit, Stewart and Hunter, (1964) pp.127-9.

⁹ See, for example Leics RO M1169/1 for the apprenticeship indenture of Mary Franks, daughter of the miller at Broughton Astley, to Mr Howe, milliner and draper of Ashby-de-la-Zouche, dated April 11th, 1888. Her father paid £20 for the two year apprenticeship; Mary served her time and the release is signed on the back by Mr Howe.

¹⁰ Interview with Miss Rita Postlethwaite and Mrs Mary Fell, in The News (Ulverston), October 24th, 1980; Tyler, Jayne and Parsons, Clare, Madame Clapham, Hull's celebrated dressmaker (1999) p.15: author's interview with Mrs Margery Lacey of Loughborough.

¹¹ Un-numbered typescript in Brunel University Library

At least she had a range of things to do. Ellen Gill, born in Woodhouse, Leeds, in 1888 started work as an apprentice c.1900, and most of her job consisted of sewing on buttons at 3d a 100, for which she had to provide her own cotton at 4 ½ d for 1000 yards¹².

Minnie Frisby was apprenticed, c.1894, at the age of 17, after a spell in domestic service, to Mrs Rawlings, who

'was supposed to be the most First Class Dressmaker in Bromsgrove -- there were about a dozen of us girls in the workroom --- I can assure you us girls knew what to wear, and my sister would usually pay for my clothes and provide me with pocket money --'

Minnie was comparatively well off as she lived with her sister who kept a hotel and had bought Minnie a piano and paid for music and dancing lessons for her at *'the Institute'* -

'Well, most of us Rawlings girls went, and what enjoyable times we had --- I shall never forget my first Ball as we all used to try to look nicest --- we always wore white or cream for our first and I know my dress looked very nice (though I say it) all cream with yards of chiffon and Lillies [sic] of the Valley which one swain had sent me ---'

They even danced at work - when Mrs Rawlings went to Birmingham she left her teenage sister in charge *'then we should have a real good Beano'* - turning back the carpet and dancing to the piano in the drawing room, or doing work for themselves. Minnie's was not the stereotypical downtrodden apprenticeship - but she was exceptional¹³.

Employers often advertised for junior staff in the press. At busy times dressmakers' and department stores' advertisements often contained postscripts inviting applications for apprenticeships. On October 18th, 1844, for example, the Leicester Journal carried an advertisement for the Misses Bosworth and Coverley, *'fancy dressmakers'* who had recently set up in business themselves, having worked with Mrs Houghton in Charles Street and afterwards in a *'foremost house in the West End of London'*. They solicited customers - and needed an apprentice. In February 1872 Messrs Kirke and Weston announced in the same paper that they were moving from 104 High Street to number 3, and that they

'Wanted for the above establishment respectable well-educated Young Ladies as In-door Apprentices for Shop, Show Room and Work Room; also Milliners, Straw-trimmers and Saleswomen. Several Vacancies for Out-door Apprentices'.

There were hundreds of similar advertisements.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Un-numbered typescript in Brunel University Library

Of course, many girls found their jobs through personal contacts. Rose Hackett of Chichester was apprenticed in 1897 at the age of 14 to a Mrs Downer, her mother's friend - a typically informal arrangement and one that worked well. She was well treated and eventually married Mrs Downer's son. She went into business on her own account in 1901 aged 17¹⁴. Mrs Stent of Westbourne was also apprenticed in Chichester at about the same time - to a Mrs Dowson in West Street. Dressmaking was perhaps not the best choice of career for a girl who admitted she had been caned in school for the number of needles she broke in Domestic Economy lessons, and Mrs Stent was much less enthusiastic about her work than was Mrs Downer. She also worked much longer hours - 8am to 9pm with an hour's break at lunchtime¹⁵. Mrs Downer's working day ended at tea-time when she joined her employer's family for a meal.

Some employers acted almost as foster mothers to their apprentices. Mrs Allinson in Whitehaven, Cumberland, in the 1880s, agreed to take Elizabeth Ann Hunter on as a 'trainee' at 8s a week (£20 pa¹⁶) including her board and lodging. She was to have a half-day every Saturday and Mrs Allinson had offered a fortnight's annual holiday. Anna Maria Mardon, a friend of the girl's late mother, over in Barrow-in-Furness, bargained on her behalf -

*'now would you allow her a month at a fortnight each time during the year - to come home - as she is very young and we would like her to come a little oftener than once a twelvemonth. I am quite sure you will have every satisfaction with her - but would like her kept under control and carefully taken care of as one of your own ---'*¹⁷.

As late as 1908, Mayer and Black found a 'Mrs P' whose only employees were three or four little girls who came to her straight from school, were paid 1s a week, taught the trade and then, a year later, were placed by her with West End houses as 'improvers'. She reported that they *'alway look in and tell me how they are getting on'*¹⁸. She, too, was acting as a sort of mother figure.

¹⁴ W. Sussex RO Add ms 18805

¹⁵ Ibid Oral history tape 1

¹⁶ An extremely high wage for an apprentice. £20 pa was the sort of wage paid to second hands in large workrooms.

¹⁷ Cumbria RO YDB17

¹⁸ Op cit, Meyer and Black, (1909) p.87

Towards the end of the century the role of the apprentice was often taken by that of the 'trotter' or errand girl, paid 4s or 5s a week. Clementina Black believed that no girl should be employed in this capacity for more than six months and that it was far inferior to an apprenticeship as a way of learning the trade¹⁹. Nonetheless, in high class firms full length dressmaking apprenticeships continued well into this century. May Duff in Ulverston took girls on two year apprenticeships in the 1910s and 20s. For the first eighteen months they worked 10 ½ hour days, without pay; for the next six months they had 2s-6d a week, then they became improvers on 5s a week²⁰. Madame Clapham in Hull was still taking apprentices in the 1930s. They worked the first year unpaid - which attracted girls from better class families who could afford to support them while they learnt. The full wage after seven years was £1-10s -03/4d in 1940²¹.

By the end of the century it was possible for girls to have a properly structured training. The government schools of design established in the 1840s originally had little to offer the would-be dressmaker, with their emphasis on technical drawing and copying works of art. Even the London Female School of Design, which opened in 1842 and achieved royal patronage in 1861, followed this curriculum. However, as the century progressed, the schools came under a new department of the Board of Trade called the 'Department of Practical Art' and they came to place much more emphasis on the acquisition of craft skills. New 'technical' schools opened specifically to teach trade skills.

Technical schools were established in most towns and cities and taught - among other things - needlework and dressmaking techniques. Following the French model, classes were established in cutting and fitting - many at elementary level - by School Boards, County Council Technical Classes, Polytechnics, the Recreative Evening School Association and the Girls' Friendly Society. By the 1890s it was possible to sit the London City and Guilds' examination in dressmaking²². Some of the women who wrote dressmaking manuals were teachers of these classes, like Jeanette Davis in Manchester, Mrs Dobson and

¹⁹ Ibid, p.87

²⁰ Interview with Miss Rita Postlethwaite and Mrs Mary Fell, former employees of Miss Duff, in The News (Ulverston), October 24th, 1980

²¹ Op cit, Tyler and Parsons, (1999) p.15

²² See Foden, F E, A History of Technical Examinations in England to 1918 with special reference to the examination work of the City and Guilds of London Institute (Reading University PhD thesis 1961) The City and Guilds of London Institute was founded in 1878.

Mrs Grenfell in Liverpool and Mrs Woodgate Low, who described herself as '*an experienced teacher*' but did not say where that experience had been gained²³.

Technical schools were not free - in 1908 a dressmaking training cost a substantial 5s a week - but they attracted large numbers of girls²⁴. Some simply hoped to learn how to make their own clothes, but others saw it as a prelude to training in dressmaking according to Mrs Grenfell. However, she warned her readers

'It should be borne in mind that many of the pupils, especially in the elementary classes, will never have seen a well-cut or well-made body, or can have much idea at first what they are expected to do'

- which gives us some indication of the type of pupil she expected to attend her classes²⁵.

The Tailor and Cutter Academy in London taught ladies' tailoring as well as men's. Its prospectus (c.1900) contained illustrations of the ladies' cutting room. (Plate 19) There were various ways of learning - residential, evening classes, postal tuition, odd lectures - and the institute set examinations, awarded diplomas and held competitions. They also offered a range of discounts on equipment. But their training was expensive. A course of 10 evening classes cost £2-2s, a single lesson cost 2s and a full course cost £10-10s. There was a special course in ladies' tailoring for either 5 or 10 guineas.

However, it was always possible to enter the trade with much less formal training, as did Hannah Mitchell. Her mother regarded dressmaking as '*ladylike*' and despatched Hannah's elder sister Lizzie to be apprenticed to a high class dressmaker in Glossop. The theory was that Lizzie would then come home and teach her sisters. Hannah herself was then apprenticed to '*an elderly, crippled lady who ran a small private business with two apprentices and a niece about my own age*' but was summoned home again when Lizzie chose to work in town rather than return to the farm²⁶. Despite this minimal training Hannah was able to find work as a dressmaker in numerous establishments after she ran away from her neurotic mother and cheerless home, aged 14, in 1885. She was not unique. 'Taking in sewing' is mentioned again and again in memoirs and interviews as a way working class women eked out the

²³ See chapter five for further details of these individuals.

²⁴ Op cit, Meyer and Black, (1909) p.171

²⁵ Grenfell, Mrs Henry, Dressmaking. A Technical Manual for Teachers (1892) p.76

²⁶ Op cit, Mitchell, (1977) p.57

family income²⁷. Some of them had trained before marriage, but a number simply capitalised on a flair for sewing.

Employment

When she had served her apprenticeship a girl hoped to be taken on as an improver. Improvers were not usually paid, and some girls paid a premium to be taken on in that capacity²⁸. Even then, their employers might only instruct them in one branch of the business, and some girls did several stints as improvers with different firms to gain all-round experience. According to Mayhew in 1849, girls were usually taken on for a period of two years, and paid a premium of between £10 and £50. A girl who had served her apprenticeship in the provinces and hoped to set up in business for herself saw *'that it would be hopeless to attain the patronage of the neighbourhood ladies unless she have the prestige of having been trained to the perfect exercise of London taste and skill'*²⁹, so she was likely to spend a term in London as an improver. In 1864, the Children's Employment Commission suggested that the normal term for an improver with a London fashion house was just six months, though a premium was still paid. A girl's period in town would also provide her with contacts for when she returned to London on her own to *'see the fashions'* on her clients' behalf. Advertisements attest to the fact that most provincial dressmakers of any standing did regularly visit London.

Her training complete, the young dressmaker then sought paid employment. Mayhew described the structure of employment in London fashion houses in the 1840s. It was little different in good provincial firms. There were first, second and third hands and assistants - though the numbers in each category depended on the size of the firm. In Glossop, in the firm where Hannah Mitchell was an improver, the staff consisted of a *'workshop head'* (first hand), two assistants and Mona the apprentice. Mona's elder sister worked as assistant in the millinery department which was run by the proprietress *'Mrs W'*³⁰. First

²⁷ For example, op cit, Mitchell (1977). Hannah Mitchell took in sewing in the early years of her married life. *'This eased the financial strain but made life very hard for me -- I soon found that a lot of the Socialist talk about freedom was only talk and these Socialist young men [one of whom she had married] expected Sunday dinners and huge teas with home-made cakes, potted meat and pies, exactly like their reactionary fathers'* p.96

²⁸ Children's Employment Commission, 1843, Vol X, p. d49 and Mayhew, quoted by Yeo and Thompson, op cit, (1971) p.520

²⁹ Op cit, Yeo and Thompson, (1971) p.520

³⁰ Ibid, p.71

hands waited on the customers, took orders, measured the clients, supervised fittings and did the cutting out. Second hands were employed to work along with the staff and supervise them, and in larger establishments there were third hands doing the same thing. Assistants were hired at busy times and might live in or out. They were variously known, as 'day workers', 'out workers', 'out assistants' or 'weekly hands'. They were hired by the week or month or season. In London, skirt making was usually 'put out' - Mayhew describes the progress of a Genoese velvet skirt from 'first rate house' to squalid attic in the arms of the outworker's small son³¹. This does not seem to have been normal practice in the provinces.

In London houses most hands lived in, and their board and lodging was part of their wage. Unscrupulous employers might stint their staff - Mayhew interviewed one girl who told him how her employer's family had 'secret' meals at which they ate properly, and then other meals which the workers attended. The family, already sated, ate very little at these sessions and thus shamed the work girls into also eating tiny portions³². Writing in 1909, Meyer and Black noted that firms were still often judged by the quality of the food they provided.

*'The quality of tea given in some work-rooms is a point about which workers feel deeply. One very nice woman still recalls with satisfaction the super-excellence of the bread and butter provided by a firm for which she worked a short time many years ago'*³³.

In the provinces, fewer workers lived in, but employers still provided meals.

Courteous employers were much appreciated. In Glossop, Hannah Mitchell's last post before she married was with a firm which

*'-- had a good middle class clientele, and paid quite decent wages judged by the low standard of the times. Twelve to fifteen shillings a week was about the average in our trade - indeed, in shops generally. Moreover, our employer was a courteous man who treated us all with respect. If he was in the shop as we passed through, he would open the door for us, bowing to us just as he did to his best customers. I don't suppose he ever realised how much this little attention was appreciated, or the return it brought him in willing service'*³⁴

One of the disadvantages of working in a dressmaker's shop was the need to look respectable. The 1864 report described dress as a 'serious item' and showed how, even if she made her own outfits, a girl who

³¹ Op cit, Yeo and Thompson, (1971) pp.522-3

³² Ibid p.531

³³ Op cit, Meyer and Black, (1909) p.69

³⁴ Op cit, Mitchell (1977) pp.80-81

came into regular contact with customers needed to spend at least £20 a year on black silk dresses³⁵. Fortunately it was only the first hands who were likely to have to incur this expense.

Some women remained paid hands all their lives, but some used their experience to set up in business on their own account.

Setting up a business

The Book of Trades of 1811 suggested that girls should not train as dressmakers if they had no finance or patronage with which to set up in business³⁶. But even money and connections did not guarantee success. Hannah Glasse (1708-70) is best known as the author of The Art of Cookery made Plain and Easy which was published in 1747. She was the illegitimate daughter of a Mr Allgood of Northumberland. He had one legitimate son, Lancelot, and several bastards, all of whom were taken into the family home and brought up as Allgoods. Hannah had something of her father's character, for at the age of 16 she eloped with John Glasse, a widower twice her age, living on a subaltern's half-pay. He died in 1748, and Hannah and her daughter set up as court milliners in London's Park Lane. Her half-brother, Lancelot, was by this time MP for Northumberland, and no doubt he urged some of his contacts to patronise her. He recorded how a stream of carriages was always to be seen outside Hannah's establishment, and deduced that she must be doing well. He was wrong. In 1754, Hannah Glasse's millinery business went bankrupt - to the tune of £10,000 - and she returned to writing cookery books³⁷. A century later, Mesdames Tasker and Thompson with £1,250 start-up capital failed within two years³⁸. Both these firms were working on a grand scale, but dressmaking could be carried on with comparatively little equipment. A handful of records survive to give an idea of what various types of establishment contained.

When Magdalene Dunbar of Edinburgh went bankrupt in 1815, an inventory was made of her stock and possessions. (Plate 21) She carried £235-12s-8d worth of stock, all of which was carefully listed and divided up by category - muslins, ribbons, bead clasps, feathers, fancy flowers, fancy trimmings and white

³⁵ Children's Employment Commission, Vol XIV, p.79

³⁶ See Chapter one p. 35

³⁷ Willan, Anne, Great Cooks and their Recipes, (1977), pp.99-101. For further information, see Dodds, Madeleine Hope, 'The Rival Cooks: Hannah Glasse and Ann Cook', Archeologia Aeliana, Society of Antiquaries, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, series 4, vol 15 (1938)

³⁸ See Introduction, p. 28

laces. She had a well furnished bedroom, parlour, kitchen and 'ware room' (linen cupboard) and silver ware, china and glass valued at £127-18s-9 ½d³⁹. Her shop and work room contents are itemised below:-

<u>'Shop</u>	£	s	d
1 set of dining tables	5	0	0
1 set of tea tables	2	8	0
1 small square table		5	0
1 stove and a set of fire irons and fender	3	0	0
1 pair of bell handles		2	6
2 mirrors	8	0	0
1 carpet	2	5	0
6 rush bottomed chairs	1	10	0
2 poles for hanging dresses on		15	0
1 ½ dozen bonnet blocks		18	0
<u>Total</u>	<u>£24</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>6</u>

Work room

2 tables			
2 work baskets			
5 chairs			
2 stools			
1 screen			
a stove, fender, shovel and tongs			
<u>Total</u>	<u>£3</u>	<u>17</u>	<u>6'</u>

Mrs Agnes Dow in Leith ran a haberdashery and millinery business and was declared bankrupt on August 12th 1834. She had employed a milliner, two shop boys and a maid, and lived in furnished rooms next door to her business at 45, Tolbooth Wynd. The sederunt books include an inventory of her stock (cottons and prints, 'Tuscan' and 'Dunstable' bonnets, caps, collars, etc.) valued at £144-12s-0d. Her equipment was worth a mere £14-5s-4d, and consisted of 6 rush seated chairs, counters, shelves, a writing stool, a mahogany desk, a large hat block, one small screen, 2 pairs of steps, 4 cap blocks, a gas 'metre' and pipes, a small glass case, a grate and fire irons, a carpet, brushes and a looking glass⁴⁰.

Sometime in 1854-5 Elizabeth Taylor wrote to her sister-in-law, Louisa. Elizabeth worked for a Mrs Goulding, dressmaker in Brighton, but she was planning to leave to set up in business on her own. She explained her plan and what she would need:

³⁹ Edinburgh RO CS96.3562

⁴⁰ Ibid CS96 4068 and 4069

*'Madame Schodeher who lived with us a year was always asking me to join her I made up my mind to try this winter to see if it will answer, if not I can always take another situation in the spring. She is very clever and I have not the slightest doubt we should do very well if we can only get up the first year - the worst is the furniture to buy, for we must have a decent showroom. I wish I had a friend to lend me £20 --- The ladies are all so fond of me in Edinburgh and there are few good dressmakers there ---'*⁴¹

Presumably the £20 was Elizabeth's contribution to the cost of setting up the new business and Madame Schodeher was to provide the remainder.

In September 1884, up in Lancashire, Elizabeth Sarah Simpson, daughter of Moses Simpson, wood turner, of 10, Upper Brook Street, Ulverston, married Samuel Smith Pattinson, son of the publican who kept the Hare and Hounds in King Street. Samuel worked as a railway clerk and also as rent collector for a Mr Fenton of Windermere who owned property in Ulverston. Elizabeth had been apprenticed in 1877 or 1878 as a milliner. The couple set up house next door to Elizabeth's parents at 8, Upper Brook Street, and rented number 1, on the corner, for Elizabeth to use as a business. She worked as a milliner and dressmaker who also sold ready made goods and haberdashery. Numerous receipts survive from 1884 relating to the furnishing of her new house (next door to her parents) and business, (on the other side of the street). (Plate 20) Most of Mrs Pattinson's initial stock was bought from Ulverston drapers and suppliers - W D Higgins, M A Wilson, Joseph Postlethwaite, Mason Bros, Henry Riley, M A Hughes, Thomas Iddon, E M Hudson, Roger Dodgson, E and J Smith and John Brewer. She even acquired a sewing machine from J B Kay of Ulverston. Her shop had a plate glass window which she insured for 4s, and Edward Dickinson charged her 6s-9d for '*writing the frieze and door*'. Her only out of town supplier was J H Barrow, linen and woollen draper and dealer in sewing machines, a few miles away in Barrow-in-Furness. She had trouble finding a suitable supplier of paper goods and tried various firms. Weeks and Fletcher of Ulverston supplied 1000 millinery bags and 100 bill heads for 15s-3d in November 1886 and 500 '*flower*' bags for 4s. She ordered 500 bill heads from William Kitchen, lithographic stationer, for 5s, but later she preferred to use the Midland Printing Works in Birmingham. Her bundle of receipts also contains invoices from plumbers, gas fitters and ironmongers but it is not clear which are for her home and which for the business⁴².

⁴¹ National Library of Scotland MS 9685

⁴² Cumbria RO BDB/38

Frances Hicks, onetime secretary to the London Tailoress's Union, described the sort of business in which she had served her own dressmaking apprenticeship in the 1890s.

'In every suburb and working class district there are to be found a number of women, who having worked for a few years in some fashionable dressmaking establishment, have set up for themselves in business and give West End style to neighbouring tradespeople, upper class servants, and perhaps a few wealthier patrons'.

Miss Hicks, her mistress and an assistant worked in the family kitchen, from 8am to 8pm, at a table in the window. They took their meals at the same table without stopping work, but had to clear their sewing away when the dressmaker's 'lazy husband' and two schoolboy sons came home for their tea. Most customers provided their own fabric, the dressmaker hired a sewing machine 'for 1s-6d a week' and beyond that

*'The chief requirement is a tidy room with fashion plates and magazines, a mirror and long white curtain which admits a good light yet screens the customer while garments are being tried on'*⁴³.

Doris Altman's shop in Silver Street in Leicester used to have just such an arrangement in the area behind their shop window as late as 1975.

Dressmaking workrooms in department stores had little more in the way of equipment. White's in Ipswich took an inventory of their machinery in 1878 and the dressmaking workroom contained the following:-

	£	s	d
'Large machine	9	0	0
Wheeler and Wilson	5	10	0
Howe	3	10	0
Large table	2	10	0
Small table		15	0
Gas burner		10	0
Clock		15	0
10 chairs	1	0	0
Door scraper		2	0
Total	£24	12	0

Since purchased by the firm (presumably later in 1878)

	£	s	d
Machine (Apl 2)	6	13	0
Kilting machine	2	2	0
Stoves (3)	4	15	6
Chairs		10	6
Mirror			
Total	£13	12	0'

⁴³ Quoted in op cit, Stewart and Hunter (1964) p.128

⁴⁴ Suffolk RO [Whites of Ipswich]

Dressmaking required comparatively little capital outlay.

Doing the job

As the above descriptions make clear, dressmaking establishments came in all shapes and sizes and catered for clients from across the social spectrum. Comparatively few records survive that give any sort of detail about working practices, so it is worth examining those few in some depth.

In large firms, workroom tasks were carefully structured. Apprentices spent their first months picking up pins and watching what went on. Cutting and fitting were the preserve of the owner or first hand and these skills were jealously guarded. Apprentices were cheap, and firms tended to take on too many at the expense of trained staff. Mrs Treadwin's first hand in Exeter explained that at Ipswich where she had been apprenticed

'The fault was in having just one first hand, and all the rest apprentices, so that the first hand, instead of only superintending and cutting out, spent half her time in working herself or unpicking the bad work of the apprentices'⁴⁵.

In a large workshop the work was divided between various specialists. In many firms girls were not taught a full range of skills but were encouraged to become expert in just one or two processes. This made them useful to their employer but unable to progress. In 1849 Eliza Ann Cory explained

'it is well known that apprentices are seldom taught how to take a pattern from the figure: the only way in which they acquire the knowledge, is by being allowed to hand the pins to the Operator, who is always the Mistress, or First Hand'⁴⁶.

Many dressmakers therefore emerged from their apprenticeships with very little knowledge of cutting and fitting and no prospect, therefore, of being able to run their own businesses.

The Carmichael/Chaffard correspondence is particularly valuable. Elizabeth Taylor's 1854 letter to her sister-in-law has already been quoted. It sounds as if Elizabeth was an assistant or second hand. She had served her apprenticeship in Edinburgh, and it was to Edinburgh she would return to set up in business on her own. Her letter to Louisa continued:

'Mrs Goulding is just returned from London, she has engaged a French dressmaker. I could not put up with her temper any longer, its an old saying and a fine one with them "work a willing horse to death" in my part I told her from ½ past 7 till 11 and sometimes

⁴⁵ Children's Employment Commission Vol XIV, interviewee 130, p.127

⁴⁶ Cory, Mrs Eliza Ann, The Art of Dressmaking (1849) preface

12 was quite hours enough for any old work horse --- I could not swallow the last tiff she and I had without cause. She thought it would all blow over again but when she found I was determined she said I should not have to take another situation she would rather give me £35 per annum and then she offered 40 the next day but I had gone to[o] far with Madam to retreat or they would have persuad'd me to stop another year, she said if she had known it she would have had a person working under me all the summer. You see they cannot get anyone to do the stays and dresses and we make nearly as many stays as dresses
-----⁴⁷

Staymaking has usually been seen as a separate trade, sometimes allied with straw bonnet making. Both involved heavy stitching through stiff materials - much more arduous work than dressmaking. It is interesting that Mrs Goulding made her clients' stays as well as their dresses.

On September 17th, 1856, after a brief spell working in Edinburgh with her former colleague, Mme Schodeher, Elizabeth Taylor married Leonard Ferdinand Chaffard, of Limoges. On the same day, her sister, Mary, also a dressmaker, married John Carmichael of Edinburgh. Little is known of either of the men, but it would seem that M Chaffard was some sort of commercial traveller in dress fabrics and trimmings. The two husbands spent some time looking for premises for their wives to use as a business before taking a shop in Edinburgh, at 2, Castle Street, which had a frontage on Princes Street. Ten years later the Chaffards moved back to Brighton with their only child, Lizzie. Ferdinand was very sick - they had to hire a 'bed chair' for him for the journey - and died shortly afterwards. Mary Carmichael continued to run the business - she seems to have been childless and widowed - and wrote regular letters to Elizabeth about what she was doing. These, together with other family letters, are pasted into a large scrap book. Most of them are undated.

There was some tension between the sisters. Mary seems to have been working to support both families and sometimes felt hard done by. *'What's the use of making money if you lose your health' 'I think you are rather hard on me for I know there are not many could have done as I have ---'* A letter from Elizabeth back to Mary justified the amount she was taking out of the business *'You think the money goes fast, remember we are a family of four adults and two children'* - presumably she was supporting some of her other relatives. Mary replied: *'How do you think I could keep house on £28? I hold my own accounts and I have had the £80 same as you except the £5 due'*. But for the most part the letters describe her working life and give a fascinating picture of trade as perceived by the head of one of Edinburgh's more prestigious firms.

'We are keeping busy, not driving'.

⁴⁷ National Library of Scotland MS9685

'Yesterday I had a visit from Mrs Lawson for mourning - one of the Oliphants of Coullie is going to be married and I had to arrange for her as they are to be in tomorrow in prospect of the trousseau of which I think there will be at least five silks all in stock ---' 'I am fairly worn out tonight, have had such a heavy day with the Oliphants, I was from 12 till 4 without ceasing speaking and advising and arranging as all was proposed to them first and then the intended had to go over all again --- I think at present there will be about twenty one dresses without jackets, crinolines, bonnets, etc and all has to be done by the first week in October without other orders and Miss Taylor away for her holiday --- I did not feel very strong after they left but I am better tonight'

'Miss Hawkins is going to be married - they've been staying in London since they got those white glaze dresses. Mrs Hawkins came in - she gave me a compliment when she said she had been to four places before to me - Semprose, Hackwood, Cameron's, Vogue - for a tulle bonnet - but she could not fix so I fixed her --⁴⁸'

The bonnets in question were probably made or trimmed on the premises and kept as stock items, though the firm also seems to have sold ready-made goods. Sometimes Mary waxed eloquent about her stock:- *'got such a pretty grey straw hat, so light, the bateau shape, sold three already trimmed velvet the same shade and veil the same colour'.*

Mary Carmichael had problems with her staff - she seems to have been a hard task mistress and was scathing about workers complaints.

'What a case with the Hairdressers [they had been on strike] - our lot will be next I shouldn't wonder' 'I should never be surprised at our lot wanting their hours shortened it seems such a pity to work till 9'.

'Wages are higher as you know by Miss Stark who has of where at first she had half the sum and workers are not to be had ---'.

Miss Stark was in fact a very good worker and had taken charge of the workroom when the forewoman, Miss Taylor, was away. Even the pernicky Mary described her work as *'first class'*. No doubt in such a firm the workwomen were well educated. A letter survives from Miss Taylor to Elizabeth, dated October 1866, by which time the Chaffards were in Brighton, and it is beautifully written and spelt.

'Thank you for your description of the fashions. We are making two dresses for a Mrs Baird staying at the "Alma Hotel" a black figured silk out of the show room, the trimming I have copied from your letter --- We are still continuing busy. Mrs Dobell and her sister have sent in material for two dresses, when out fitting them on they made kind enquiries after your health and Mrs Dobell desired me to give you kind compliments. A Box from Paris has arrived today which they are unpacking but I have not seen the contents yet. We are still getting on very nicely but I shall be very glad to see Mrs Carmichael home again.

⁴⁸ Interestingly enough, the Edinburgh Post Office directories for 1855-8 make no mention of Semprose, Hackwood, or Vogue, but there are two Camerons - Violard Cameron and Co at 124, George Street and the Misses Cameron at 29, Frederick Street. This is another reminder that trades directories are not a wholly reliable source.

There is no word of Miss Stark going to be married but indeed I could not spare her for any such thing ---'

The personal lives of staff could not get in the way of business. Even Mary's reporting of a tragedy - *'Miss Sharp, the tall apprentice is now dead, went home ill, she bled at the nose and ears, she was 14 ½ ----'* was dispassionate. Miss Muir, another member of staff left to go to another firm, Remingtons. *'I suppose Miss Nicoll has persuaded her, they were great friends - fortunately I have one in the work room who can take her place'* wrote Mary, crossly, before admitting that the girl was also to be paid more for shorter hours in her new place. She was overworked herself and overworked her staff. *'I am overwhelmed with work here - 10 dresses to turn out ---- I could not sleep last night with the worry'*

Mary Carmichael's letters provide one of the fullest accounts available of practice in dressmaking establishments. Her customers were wealthy society ladies.

At the other end of the country, and also at the other end of the social spectrum, were the dressmaker clients of B. Thomas of Helston in Cornwall. He (or possibly she) kept a haberdashery business and also made garments. Most of the work was repairs and the firm did more tailoring than millinery or dressmaking. What is interesting, however, is that they were supplying several local dressmakers. Cornwall was not a wealthy county, and Thomas's dressmaker clients seem to have been working on a very small scale indeed, probably for poor rural customers. They bought in tiny quantities for one job at a time. On December 18th 1847 Mary J Borrows, *'tailoress'* bought 5 yards of print at 4d a yard; on the 24th Mary Julian, *'dressmaker'*, was unable to pay for the goods she bought and left 9s-5 ½d owing, but three days later she was back for 2½d of tape, 1d of needles and 15 yards of binding at 1s-6½d. Miss Meloney *'straw bonnet maker'* bought a yard of book muslin at 3d and 6½d worth of wire thread and pins on May 5th, 1848, on the 24th she was back for 1s-10 ½d worth of ribbon and crepe. On July 3rd Mary Tippet, *'dressmaker'*, bought a yard of shirt cotton (used for lining bodices) for 8½d, and on 18th she bought 17s-7d worth of goods; at the end of November she bought 11s-3d worth of print, moreen and trimming *'for two dresses'* and on December 1st she came back for 5½d worth of ribbon to finish them off. All through 1848 and 1850 she came back for batches of goods costing around 1s or 2s⁴⁹.

⁴⁹ University of Glasgow Business Records Centre HF 24\1

These women were working on the lowest possible profit margin, buying from their local stockist who himself was trading on a small scale and could not afford to give much in the way of discounts.

We have already seen how Elizabeth Pattinson established her business in Ulverston. We know comparatively little about the goods she made and nothing at all about the prices she charged or the staff she employed. But many bundles of invoices survive relating to her business and these shed light on what she bought and on her relationships with suppliers.

As we have seen, young Mrs Pattinson bought most of her initial stock from local suppliers in Ulverston itself - it is surprising today that the small town could support so many drapers - the population of Ulverston in 1881 was 10,001 and Slater's 1890 Directory lists 8 tailor/drapers and 5 dressmaker/drapers - but the town would also have served a large - if sparsely populated - rural hinterland. Elizabeth Pattinson also bought goods from Manchester, London, Nottingham and Ripon. Most of these were ordered by post and sent by rail, and odd little notes survive. For example, on March 18th, 1891 -

'Sorry we cannot do the mob cap and Jack Tar cap' (November 9th 1895) 'Sorry we are sold out of the brown hat, have sent the nearest' (April 23rd 1895) 'Sorry this is the nearest we have in all white, can have at any time made exactly to pattern, say 1/4 doz of any kind'

But even a quarter of a dozen was a large order for Mrs Pattinson - few of her orders were for more than £2 or £3. Many were for less - on one occasion she ordered a single widow's cap for 1s-1½d, postage 3d, all the way from Manchester. To modern eyes it is amazing that large firms were prepared to supply a tiny provincial milliner with such small quantities of goods. She bought the basic shapes for her hats - chip, straw and mob caps - roughly once a month, for about £2 a time, from *'Rayner and Lee, wholesale dealers in straw bonnets, ribbons, flowers, feathers, millinery, etc'* of North Bridge, Ripon. Batho, Taylor and Ogden, suppliers of millinery goods, and Peel, Watson and Co, manufacturers of baby linen, underwear, sun bonnets, aprons, etc., both in Church Street, Manchester, were also suppliers she used regularly. In the period October 1886 to December 1887 records survive for her expenditure with the firms which by then were her three main suppliers. She spent £141-8s-1½d with Batho Taylor and Ogden; she placed 39 separate orders - three a month - totalling £107-11s-6½d with Peel, Watson and Co; and with S J Watts and Co of Manchester, suppliers of ready made clothing, laces and trimmings, aprons, etc., she spent £9-12s-6d. Her expenditure remained roughly the same with these firms until she ceased trading in 1902. Her stock books also survive, showing much of her trade was in ready made goods - in 1891 she had stock worth £248-12s-6d; by 1900 it had risen to £349-4s-8d⁵⁰. She also made

⁵⁰ Cumbria RO BDB38

dresses and bonnets - these will be discussed below. She was trading on a relatively small scale, but, as we shall see in chapter three, she was making a comfortable profit

Customer demands influenced the way dressmakers had to work. E J Clarke, of Bourn in Cambridgeshire, did ladies tailoring in the 1880's. He seems to have been trained by the Tailor and Cutter and had a copy of the Cutter's Guide which taught a specific system of pattern cutting (Plate 22). However, he seems to have used his own system, which does not tally - (Plate 23). He did very little women's work - less than 0.5% in his day book can be identified as being for women. A letter to him, dated February 9th 1919, survives from Sylvia Pettit in Barton Road, Cambridge, wanting a new costume and requesting he send some patterns in blue *'I should like the costume as quickly as possible before the Boy comes from Germany, which I expect will be in the course of a fortnight or so ---'* She speaks of *'coming home'* and paying him for a brown costume, so presumably she originated in Bourn. Bourn is a small place and Clarke's were not catering for a high class clientele - nonetheless, well into the 20th century, customers like Mrs Pettit expected speedy service⁵¹.

Most firms were prepared to provide it, whatever the cost to their workers. Indeed, it was a selling point. In Dalton, in Lancashire, the Misses Dixon provided a typical example, advertising that they would make mourning *'in the neatest manner and on the shortest possible notice'*⁵². The result was that dressmakers were expected to work extraordinarily long hours - as we saw in the Children's Employment Commission Reports discussed in chapter one.

Most of the dressmakers who wrote their memoirs for Professor Burnet in the 1950s and 60s⁵³ remembered working an 11 ½ or 12 hour day. For Hannah Mitchell in Glossop in the 1880s the 8pm end of the day often became 10, sometimes midnight, and in summer, 1 or 2 am. *'We envied the cotton workers who streamed out of the mill as soon as the "buzzer" went at ½ past 5. At least they knew when their working day would end. We never did'*⁵⁴

⁵¹ Cambs RO, R82/102

⁵² Soulsby's Ulverston Advertiser and General Intelligencer, December 21st, 1849

⁵³ These are listed in Burnett, John, Vincent, David and Mayall, David, The Autobiography of the Working Class Vol 1, 1790-1800, (1984). They are deposited in Brunel University library.

⁵⁴ Op cit, Mitchell (1977) p.70

Hannah had various jobs. She was a speedy worker and when working for a skirt maker earned 17s-6d a week - the standard rate of 15s plus a 3d bonus for every skirt she made over and above the six that were expected. Hannah could make 10. One of her best jobs, surprisingly, was with a second hand clothes dealer, for whom she repaired and re-made items. Sometimes she worked on garments that bore the tabs of firms who had employed her in the past. The dealer paid *'far better wages than the high class firms who made the garments in the first place'*⁵⁵!

Dressmaking was not an easy trade in which to make a profit and some dressmakers offered additional services. Many sold ready-made goods or tea. Mrs Smith, straw bonnet manufacturer in Leicester's Haymarket made a little extra money in 1840 by renting space to *'Mr S Lee, Ear and Eye Specialist'* for a few days⁵⁶. Anne Elsworth had a shop in Leicester High Street next door to Daniel, the bookseller's. She sold caps, flowers, cuffs, collars, ruches and children's lace, as well as making garments for her clients - and she also acted as agent for a mysterious drink called *'Evans Piqua Plant'* which was marketed as a highly refreshing substitute for tea and coffee!⁵⁷

Relations with clients

The relationship between dressmaker and client could be an intimate one. This may be one of the reasons why, by the 19th century, it was essentially a female trade. A rather risque French illustration of 1777-8 shows a tailor measuring a lady who is clad only in her chemise and corset (Plate 1). By the 19th century L W Shaw's prize-winning essay advised his readers and fellow-tailors *'there is no necessity to be afraid of touching your customer, for while taking the measures you will frequently have the opportunity of detecting abnormalities --'* but ladies, he warned *'are proverbially so much quicker than the sterner sex in detecting remissness in these respects'*⁵⁸! No doubt many men - if not their wives and daughters - were unwilling to allow such contact to take place.

The dressmakers' shop was an all-female environment, and though it is unlikely that many real dressmakers acted as matchmakers like their fictional counterparts, it is probable that many clients

⁵⁵ Ibid, pp. 78-79

⁵⁶ Leicester Chronicle, January 18th 1840

⁵⁷ The Leicestershire Mercury, Jan 20, 1844

⁵⁸ Shaw, LW, The Cutting Room, its duties and routine an essay awarded first prize by The Tailor and Cutter (c.1892)

confided in them. The first of the trade journals - the Drapers' and Milliners' Gazette - appeared in 1871. Some of the advertisements it carried are revealing. Advertisements for beauty products featured largely - including the wonderful '*Alsatian herb wash for hair*' allegedly discovered by an Alsatian peasant woman, once nearly bald but now (in 1877) with hair over seven feet long! But there were also advertisements for much more intimate products, like Land's rosebud liniment for sore nipples, Cardson's Binder Belts '*especially useful after accouchement*', sanitary towels (Southalls offered a free sample to ladies who organised bazaars - an early example of target marketing) and booklets with titles like To the Married which gave contraceptive advice. There were patent medicines, like Nurse Lilley's Royal Female Pills and Mother Siegel's constipation remedy. No doubt the advertisers hoped that dressmakers would distribute these to their clients along with the false hair and remedies for highly coloured complexions that were also advertised. The choosing and fitting of dresses was a time-consuming occupation; there was plenty of time for private discussions and personal advice.

Of course, not all clients got on with their dressmakers. We have already observed the tensions between Sarah Thomas in Cirencester and the dressmaker who was making her wedding dress. Young Mrs Smith, newly married to the Rev Reginald Smith, visited a new dressmaker in Dorset on May 3rd, 1836 '*Went to the Dress Maker. Quite a Musician of wind - arrived at 1 o'clock and stayed till late in the afternoon*' she recorded in her diary⁵⁹. It is unlikely that many confidences were exchanged there.

And not all dressmakers were conscientious. A difficult commission might be more trouble than it was worth. In 1823 Mrs C Butlin of Rugby asked her friend, Frances Woutherington, who was on a visit to London, to try to find out what had happened to an order she had placed with a dressmaker there. Frances wrote to her:

*'I went on Friday morning to Miss Forbes, No 1 York Street to make the enquiry you wished me to do respecting your pelisse and found it in the same state as it was when you returned it. Miss F told me it was a very difficult black to match and that she was fearful she should not be able to make the alterations you require, she was going into the city on business, I therefore begged she would take a piece of the silk with her and try to match it which she promised to do and let me have the result in the evening --- I have not seen or heard anything of her since ---'*⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Dorset RO D500/1

⁶⁰ Northants RO, 206p/240

The Carmichael/Chaffard correspondence throws a good deal of light on how the sisters saw their customers⁶¹. Clients could be amazingly selfish. Mary Carmichael described one to Elizabeth:

'Had a visit on Saturday afternoon from Miss Bateman, had a cup of tea, just in the midst - walked in Lady Braithwaite - wanted a Bonnet, this was ½ past 6 and wanted me to unlock and turn out everything. I told her I knew there was nothing she would really like but could shew her some Tuesday --'

Then there was

'Mrs D Mackenzie Clark Marman - Elizabeth Maclaine that was, has removed to this address Tighnabruaich near Greenock. I have two dresses for her I think I told you in a former letter - and [she] has the coolness to say 'pay carriage of Box''

Tighnabruaich is on the western side of the Kyles of Bute, several hours by sea up the Firth of Clyde from Glasgow. In the mid 19th century it was probably at least two days' journey from Edinburgh. It was difficult to persuade some clients to pay at all. *'The Kempes have just come in and paid - there with a deduction of course'*. The deduction was probably for paying in ready money. Miss Kempe had owed £38-19s and Major Kempe £1-4s.

Clients could simply be capricious. Mrs Hay Gordon called to get Mrs Carmichael to change a bonnet she herself had chosen *'because nobody liked her in it'*. We can deduce that Mrs Nollneye's sister was also an unpopular client - Mary simply described her as *'the one who played the harp'*. But others could be kind and congratulatory. Mary frequently passed on to Elizabeth the good wishes of their customers. One - C Vinck(?) of Glasgow wrote to Elizabeth herself, enquiring about her health, wanting to visit her in Brighton and sending a present for little Lizzie:

'I see Mrs Carmichael regularly in Edinbro and am very pleased that the business continues good, she certainly sends out some of the handsomest dresses I see anywhere and deserves success'

A lengthy correspondence survives between Mrs Pattinson in Ulverston and Mrs Fenton in Windermere⁶². Mrs Pattinson's husband collected rents for Mrs Fenton's husband, and at some point Mrs Fenton decided to patronise the rent collector's wife's dressmaking business. There were advantages for her. Samuel Pattinson travelled to Windermere regularly to hand over the rents and could deliver items for fitting. There was rather more than a business relationship between the families and Mrs Pattinson did occasional

⁶¹ National Library of Scotland MS9685

⁶² Cumbria RO BDB 38

errands in town for Mrs Fenton out in the country. From Mrs Pattinson's point of view it must have been a less than happy arrangement, for Mrs Fenton was hardly the ideal client. Her pen tended to run away with her and she had difficulty making up her mind:

'My bonnet arrived safely and is very pretty but rather small, I think. I think if I had strings of a rather wide lace it might be better and will [you] put them a little forwarder so as to make the sides of the face a little more - and please make me a bow to fix on for it and tie the lace - it soon looks shabby. If you have not any wider lace please send me half a yard the same as the strings - the bow as well ---'

'My hat fits very comfortably but after the soft silk that would bend any way it feels rather stiff - I like it very much but I am returning it to have more trimming on - some loops from the crimson round to the other side to fill it up and I think if they were made of the plain velvet they would look well - just - little fancy bows on loops and I would like a bow at the back where the gauze is tied on to fill up a bit - Mr F thinks it a beautiful hat - but I think it a little juvenile - but the members will make it all right - the velvet both plain and ribbed is very pretty. Some thought a bit of feather trimming would look nice - but leave it to you - I don't like great spreading bows - the crimson one is very nice - the canvas is very nice but I still prefer thick Turkey red cotton --- what a trouble I give you ---'

'--- the cape is too short - it just cuts off in the worst place for me and shows all the worst parts of me - fortunately it just fits a friend of mine who has a good stylish figure ---'

'I like two frills and quilting on other people but not on myself, it makes me too round and plain'

'I thought a little cape without any lining just to reach below the waist would be nice - would you give me your advice please. I can't afford anything expensive. I have had a great deal of wear out of the crape clothes and if I live it will do well for winter -- I do so dislike being fitted on -- it need not be made quite the same just a change somehow and a little crape - there is a kind of embroidered crape --- I am giving you a deal of trouble'

Indeed she was, and it was to get worse. The crepe dresses were mourning wear for Mr Fenton who had just died⁶³. Mrs Fenton had to take over responsibility for his properties, she was lonely and the strain was just too much. Her letter continued:

'When you send my bonnet would you send a bottle of whisky from Mackareth's 3/2 proof Scotch - Dr Mason said I had to have some --- if you can get the material in Ulverston as cheap or cheaper it is all right --'

Week after week Mrs Pattinson sent her bottles of whisky hidden in corset boxes or wrapped in garments. The requests continued for garments and alterations, comfortable bonnets and dresses that would not make her feel too hot or look too fat. Poor Mrs Pattinson must have despaired of her cantankerous client.

⁶³ Many of the letters are undated, so it is difficult to be sure of the date of Mr Fenton's death.

Other firms had troublesome clients too. Cockshutt and Preston in Kendall kept a draper's shop and did millinery and dressmaking. They served a large district and seem to have operated an informal mail order service. A number of clients' letters survive and it would appear that they expected speedy service - many correspondents expected a reply or goods by return of post⁶⁴. It would also seem from the letters that many of their clients, though literate, were not particularly well-educated; they were nonetheless extremely demanding, though sometimes it is difficult to be sure exactly what it was they wanted.

'The dress piece I have chosen is to [sic] dark for the occasion it is required for. Will you dispose of it if you can and let me have another much lighter. I will be in the Town soon and will call as I do not like this one now when I see it again I mean it is much to [sic] dark'

wrote S Hayhurst from Milnthorpe. Jane Robinson of Ambleside informed Cockshutts that *'I should like a deep flounce and frilling on the bottom of the skirt but no fringe on tunic hoping the Lady who makes it will excuse my freedoms [sic] --'*. Mrs Wood of Bowness had particular difficulty with her spelling -

'I right to ask if you will be so kind as to send 7 Do of buttons this sizes the morn I sent 2 Yards of paton Velvet not so Dark as the Dress. Mrs Ward will be at Kendal Saturday Next Pleas to send By Moor Carryer Wensday' [sic]

So did a lady in Stricklandgate -

'Would Mr Cockshot send M Williamson a nother Peeitcote to look at with only one dress Flounce she will return them at 1 o'clock and the price on them in plain figers PS Send them by the Little girl'

The firm often had to interpret their client's needs: *'Will you kindly send me 6 yards of Black fringe, I have quite forgot the name at present it is a thickish knotted fringe and greatly worn on winter costumes, it is 6 ½ or 7d per yard ---'* wrote Ms Thompson of Bowness.

Cockshutt's were not always the most efficient of firms, they were serving a large district and were dependant on the vagaries of the local carriers. The notes they received when things went wrong are peremptory in the extreme: *'will Mr Preston please inquire upstairs what time Mrs Thompson's dress is coming she wants it without fail by 3 o'clock --'* ran one pencilled missive. Jane Fleming of Ambleside was quite sarcastic:

'I think I am not to have an Ulster Coat from Kendall, I have never received one yet, although I have got a postcard saying you had forwarded it per Bennets — I would really like to know where it asgot [sic] to'

⁶⁴ University of Glasgow Business Records Centre, DB96/10

But a few customers were polite, like Sarah Wrigley:

'I received my costume on Saturday evening and approve of it. Will you say to Miss Lister (the dressmaker) I am pleased with the style and my daughter considers it suits me - the costume is handsome'.

Even the Liverpool dressmaker, interviewed in the Liverpool Review in 1887, most of whose work was making dresses for servant girls, complained about the demands of her clients. *'Some people are never satisfied but come back again and again for alterations, until you are sick of the very sight of the thing, and would like to burn it if you dared'*⁶⁵

Nonetheless, some dressmakers were remarkably successful. Madame Emily Clapham managed to establish a court dressmaking firm in Hull which numbered Queen Maud of Norway amongst its clients. As Emily MacVitie she had served her apprenticeship in Scarborough in the 1880s. She then married Haigh Clapham, a man with enough money to set her up in business, and they purchased a house in the centre of Hull in 1887. Emily Clapham had an eye for fashion, but she was never really a designer. Her technique was to buy models from Paris and London fashion houses, and then copy them, mixing and matching details like sleeves and necklines, and using her own fabrics and colour schemes. From the start she aimed for an exclusive clientele and attracted the patronage of East Riding society. She did not advertise, but relied on recommendations. Muriel Wilson, daughter of a shipping magnate and a renowned beauty, and Lady Ida Sitwell, Osbert Sitwell's mother were among her early clients. Soon she was serving a clientele from beyond the East Riding, and each season she would travel to Grimsby, York, Harrogate and London, holding shows and keeping appointments with her clients at a series of hotels. She would meet Queen Maud at Sandringham. Clearly Emily Clapham was talented, and able to flatter her customers, but she was also a shrewd businesswoman⁶⁶.

Mrs Rose Downer of Chichester worked as a travelling dressmaker for ladies, and, like Madame Clapham, most of her clients came to her by personal recommendation. She does not always give dates, but some of her memories must come from after the First World War when the social order was changing rapidly. All the same, her earlier reminiscences were of the early 1900s, when conditions in the trade had changed little since the late 19th century.

⁶⁵ On 17th September. Quoted by Jarvis, Anthea, Liverpool Fashion, (1981) pp.17-18

⁶⁶ Op cit, Tyler and Parsons, (1999) pp.5-10

Mrs Downer was the granddaughter of an Irish gentlewoman who had been disinherited by her family for marrying the groom. Rose had probably inherited something of her grandmother's gentility, for her clients seem to have treated her very much as an equal. As an apprentice she had worked for Mrs Anderson, wife of a General. She recommended her to another officer's wife whose daughter was marrying 'a famous literary critic' and needed a trousseau. Not only did Rose make the trousseau, she was also invited to the wedding as a waitress and rewarded with a gold sovereign for her pains. From there her career snowballed and she was soon invited to work for Mrs Patrick Faulkener-Wisden ('Mrs X') in Kent⁶⁷.

'I did some lovely dresses for her and we used to go to London to get materials from Liberty's, Dickins and Jones and many of the best shops. --- We usually had lunch at Dickins and Jones or some other good Restaurant --- I was treated very much like a companion, and when I went out took the two King Charles Spaniels with me for a walk. "Bijou" and "Mimi" ---'

At another house, Craigwell, on the south coast:

'One of our late Kings stayed there --- Here I worked with the French maid and made some beautiful velvet coats and gowns --- I had my meals in the Servant's Hall sitting on the right hand side of the Butler, the French maid sitting on the right hand side of the housekeeper ---'

At Mrs X's she took breakfast in the nursery and often worked there. When she was working on one particular dress:

'--- I never now see such beautiful linen, it was as soft as silk. As the lace had to be let in by hand there was some close sewing and Mrs X suggested that I took it down to the beach to do. The children were going there too, and I often wonder how I managed to keep it spotless, but I did ---'

As she did more and more work for the family her friendship with Mrs X deepened. She was asked to use the front staircase - a mark of respect which distinguished her from the servants - and was served her meals on a tray with 'lots of very dainty food, for my supper, ice cream!' During the war she helped Mrs X organise a hospital ball and later the family would give her theatre tickets. Mrs Downer's only son was born at about the same time as Mrs X's third child, so the two women must have been much of an age. 'After a while she wrote to asked me to go to her and if possible bring my son, which I did --- The children played in the nursery while we discussed clothes!' The friendship survived a misjudgement on her part which could have proved disastrous. Mrs Downer was persuaded to copy one of the dresses she had made for Mrs Wisden for another lady. The two wore them to the same function.

⁶⁷ W. Sussex RO Add ms 18805

There were no recriminations, but Mrs X never wore her's again. Mrs Downer was wise enough never to repeat her mistake.

Mrs Downer was talented, genteel and working for an upper class clientele, but throughout the social spectrum, women had unique relationships with their dressmakers. The dressmaker knew them intimately, and was in control of the impression they made in society.

Selling their wares

Any commodity has to be advertised, and as more and more dressmaking firms were established, customers had to be wooed. Sometimes it was price, or location, that determined which dressmaker a particular client would patronise, but in most areas there were many firms to choose from. Ladies were fickle, and unless they found a real 'treasure' - as Mrs X did in Mrs Downer - they would take their custom elsewhere on a chance recommendation or if the price was right. Individuals would patronise different people for different jobs. Mrs Susanna Ingleby in Staffordshire, for example, used the services of at least 14 dressmakers over a period of as many years⁶⁸.

Dressmakers, therefore, had actively to seek custom. Many advertised in the press, sometimes on a regular basis, more usually at specific times of year. Until the middle of the century at least, April-May and October were the provincial dressmaker's busiest times, when new fashions came out. Where there was a local press, these are the times of year when dressmakers' advertisements are most likely to be found.

Most such advertisements specify particular dates and times, so presumably something special was arranged for regular clients. On November 26th 1828 in the Leicestershire Herald and General Advertiser for example:- *'Mrs Pegg respectfully informs the Ladies of Leicester and its vicinity that her SHOW OF FASHIONS for the WINTER SEASON (which she has selected in London) will be ready for inspection on THURSDAY 27TH inst'.*

Mrs Pegg was one of the dressmakers patronised by Eliza Spurrett (see appendix two) and her premises were in Southgates. On May 6th 1829 the Misses Fowkes advertised in the same paper:-

'After several years experience in Leicester and subsequently in a First Rate House in London [they] have the honour to announce they have opened showrooms opposite Miss

⁶⁸ See Inder, Pamela and Aldis, Marion, 'Buttons, braids, bones and body linings, a Staffordshire lady and her London dressmaker', Staffordshire History, Spring 1997, reproduced in part in appendix one

Linwood's in Belgrave Gate --- [showing] an assortment of elegant Millinery and Dresses of the prevailing fashions of the Beau Monde --- to open on 11th May'.

On August 19th 1849, L and E Spencer of Ulverston opened a millinery and dressmaking establishment on Benson Street and notified their potential clients that they were '*respectfully invited*' to a display of current fashions. On March 26th 1836, Mr C Beales, hatter of Nottingham acting as agent for '*fashions by Louis Stumpke*' advertised a display of 15 elegant drawn figures '*richly coloured and displayed in two distinct rows --- with a report*'. Such advertisements appeared regularly but this is one of the few advertisements which give us a clue what the visitor might expect to see.

But by no means all firms advertised in the press. Susanna Ingleby and Mrs Birch travelled from Armitage to Rugeley to see '*Mrs Dinsdale's and Mrs Bown's new fashions*' in April 1863⁶⁹. The local paper for that date carries no advertisement for either of these fashion shows, but the ladies must have learnt about them somehow. In May 1840 eleven Leicester dressmakers advertised their new fashions in the press, but we know that at that date there were at least 54 dressmaking firms in the town. How did the rest of them advertise?

It would seem that quite often fliers were sent, or delivered by hand, to regular clients. I have not seen any that relate specifically to dressmaking establishments, but a number survive for other clothing businesses. A very early one, dated 1784, for Thomas Lomas of Leicester, draper, lists his stock and prices. (Plate 24) Another handout details the bankrupt stock of J Winder, Linen and Woollen draper, Market Place, Leicester. These may have been delivered by hand or posted in the shop's windows, but there is one about Robert Baker and Sons' half yearly sale on 12th July 1884 which was sent through the post to an address in Great Dalby⁷⁰. Occasionally dressmakers advertised that they would not be sending handouts - for example, Mrs Walker advertising in the Leicester Journal on May 3rd, 1844, stated that there would be '*no circulars sent*' - implying that this was unusual. A similar advertisement from Mrs Bark appeared in the same paper on May 8th 1857.

We know that '*going to see the new fashions*' was something most ladies did. The arrival of the new London fashions in Cranford caused Miss Matty some problems:

⁶⁹ Keele University Library, Special Collections, diary of Mrs Susanna Ingleby, 1863

⁷⁰ Leics RO, Lomas DE 1267/6, Winder DE759/7 and Baker Misc 26/1

*"Well, my dear," she said, "the thing is this: it is not etiquette to go till after twelve; but then, you see, all Cranford will be there, and one does not like to be too curious about dress and trimmings and caps with all the world looking on ---"*⁷¹

This display took place in the attic of Mr Johnson's shop. Even he went to London for the new fashions:

*'-- the profits of brown soap and moist sugar enabled the proprietor to go straight to (Paris, he said until he found his customers too patriotic and John Bullish to wear what the Mounseers wore) London, where, as he often told his customers, Queen Adelaide had appeared, only the week before, in a cap exactly like the one he showed them ---'*⁷²

Mr Johnson's customers may have been naive, but most dressmakers' advertisements did lay great stress on the source of the new fashions - usually London or Paris - and many dressmakers travelled to select their stock in person.

There was no shortage of information about fashion. Women's magazines had existed since the middle of the 18th century and by 1825 at least five titles were available, all of which included fashion plates and information about fashion⁷³. Lady's diaries and pocket books also often included fashion illustrations. (Plate 26) But an engraving, coloured or plain, even accompanied by a description, was no substitute for the real thing. It was the dressmaker who could provide samples of the new fabrics, show how they draped and what they felt like, and demonstrate what colours were new that season. She could also display examples of new ready-made goods like bonnets and gloves and shawls. Ladies relied on their dressmaker to translate an illustration or an idea into a garment that fitted, flattered, impressed the beholder and did not cost more than they could afford.

Health

The long hours dressmakers worked took their toll. Medical men confirmed this. For example, George Shaw MD of the Leicester Royal Infirmary, wrote to the Children's Employment Commissioners in 1843:

'It is a general practice for these young persons to work long hours, to be subjected to close confinement, and to have frequently poor diet. --- The young persons who are employed by the principal dressmaking establishments, are more subject to long hours of work than others. The common results are dyspepsia, derangement of the uterine action, head ache and pain in the side: there are also frequently swelling about the ankles, and a

⁷¹ Gaskell, Mrs, Cranford, Macmillan 1891 edition, p.223

⁷² Ibid, p.112

⁷³ La Belle Assemblée (1806-32), The Female Preceptor (1813-), Ladies' Fashionable Repository (1809-95), The Ladies' Pocket Magazine (1824-51), and the World of Fashion (1824-51) There were many more women's magazines later in the century, see White, Cynthia, Women's Magazines 1693-1968 (1970) pp.306-312

*general languor, accompanied with great pallor*⁷⁴

Many women blamed dressmaking for the problems they had when they married and had children - presumably this was what Dr Shaw meant when he wrote of '*uterine action*'. As late as 1914 one of Margaret Llewellyn Davies' Maternity Letters correspondents attributed the difficulties she had had in childbirth to her work.

*'My confinements (five) were however, hard, bad times --- This I have always put down to the fact that at the age of thirteen I began to learn dressmaking, which entailed sitting long hours at a stretch, at a time when the bones are in rather a soft state. A midwife whom I had engaged as nurse during my last confinement quite agreed that this was most likely'*⁷⁵.

Sewing was also blamed for damaging women's eyesight. It was reported to a meeting of subscribers to the North London Ophthalmic Institution in 1844 that:

*'Out of 669 patients during the previous year no less than 81 were poor needlewomen whose eyes had been materially injured by the incessant application at fine work to earn a precarious subsistence'*⁷⁶

Working at mourning - sewing matt black fabrics with black thread - was seen as terribly bad for the eyes, as were some other textile tasks like lace making and white-work embroidery on muslin. One of the 1864 commissioners interviewed three dressmakers who were in Cheltenham General Hospital. One of them, a girl of sixteen, was in hospital for the second time with eye problems which she attributed to having worked for two consecutive nights on a mourning order⁷⁷.

Dr Frederick Tyrrell of the London Ophthalmic Hospital described the effects he believed this work had on the eyes:-

' --- in the first instance a state of congestion of the blood-vessels is induced, which causes temporary confusion of vision, with uneasiness in the eye-ball and about the forehead, and frequently an increased secretion of fluid from the eyes; intolerance of light, in varying degrees, accompanies these changes. In the second stage the distress of vision becomes permanent, objects being seen as if viewed through a gauze, and usually numerous grey or black spots seem to float before the eyes when exposed to the light; the eye-balls are painful and tender, and more uneasiness is experienced in the forehead. In the third stage the mist gradually thickens, the spots become more numerous and dense, and the patient

⁷⁴ Interviewee 627

⁷⁵ Llewellyn Davies, Margaret, Maternity Letters from Working Women (1978) letter 159, p.185

⁷⁶ Illustrated London News, Jan 27, 1844

⁷⁷ Children's Employment Commission, Vol XIV, p.123, interviewee no 95. She had spent a previous period of five weeks in hospital with the same complaint and, at the time she was interviewed, had been in hospital for three weeks.

experiences sparks and flashes of light, and sometimes the appearance of various beautiful colours ---'

Patients who reached the second stage did not recover⁷⁸. White Cooper FRCS, consulting ophthalmic surgeon to the Dressmaker's Benevolent Association claimed to have seen 1,360 cases of eye problems caused through overwork in 9 years, though interestingly he also claimed to have seen '*ladies*' who had damaged their eyes in the same way. He had patented a solution - a dangerous-looking '*eye douche*'⁷⁹.

However, current medical opinion is that such work was unlikely to do permanent damage to the sight. What tends to happen is that the eye finds it difficult to adjust to distance viewing after a long period working in close focus; most people's sight would recover from this naturally after a period of rest. However, the common practice of sponging the eyes with spirits - whisky or gin - to sharpen the sight may well have introduced infection, which in exhausted, malnourished women, without the benefit of antibiotics, would have been difficult to cure and could have led to blindness⁸⁰.

Indeed, many of the girls who entered the trade - like many working class teenagers in the 19th century - would already have been underfed, unhealthy or consumptive and unfit to cope with long hours and minimal exercise. Nonetheless, census evidence shows that a significant number of dressmakers survived well into their 70s.

Trouble with the law

In 1886 Miss Payne, dressmaker, of Green Hill, Sherborne in Dorset, consulted Ffooks, a local firm of solicitors⁸¹. On a trip to London she had ordered some buttons and '*beltings*' - the petersham bands that were attached inside the waistband of 1880s dresses and which buckled at the centre front inside the bodice to hold the garment in place⁸². These were often used as maker's labels and were woven or printed with the dressmaker's name and address. Miss Payne had ordered the goods from Barnett and

⁷⁸ Ibid, interviewee 623

⁷⁹ Ibid, interviewee 407

⁸⁰ I am indebted to Dr Alun Davies of the North Staffordshire Medical History Trust for the enquiries he made on my behalf about this subject

⁸¹ Dorset RO D148/25/43

⁸² See Chapter six plates 81, 82 and 83

Barnett of 157, Goswell Place and 1, Upper Charles Street, London, and the order had been for 3 gross of assorted jet buttons at 5s, 3 gross of assorted ivory buttons at 4s-9d and 3 gross of ivory barrel shaped buttons at 7s. The invoice arrived on August 18th and she was horrified to discover that she had ordered in such quantities - she believed she had ordered in dozens. A letter of August the 19th makes the situation clear:-

'--- you must be aware we do not sell buttons by the dozen, being only wholesalers --- The Beltings are being printed and are perfectly useless to us now, and will be sent to you when finished, with the buttons. We shall be pleased to give you credit for the goods, but decline to take them back, having been specially ordered ---'

They gave her three months to pay, but on September 24th they agreed to cancel the order for buttons. In fact the beltings did not arrive until November. First the printer made a mistake and mis-spelt Sherborne as 'Sherborn', then - *'November 15th --- owing unfortunately to two deaths in the family the business has been temporary[sic] suspended ---'*. Finally, as the business went into receivership, they accepted £2 for the beltings *'if sent by the next post'* rather than the £2-5s they had originally charged.

It was a trivial little case and we only know about it because of the random survival of a bundle of letters in a solicitor's office, but what is interesting is Miss Payne's tenacity about not paying - probably because she simply could not afford to. Like many small businesses she seems to have had too small a profit margin to buy anything in bulk.

Record keeping

This chapter has examined dressmakers' records, but standards of record keeping were very variable. By the end of the century, George Henry Richardson had produced a book, Drapers', Dressmakers' and Milliners' Accounts (the 3rd edition came out in 1904 and is the one I have used). His advice was aimed at large firms and department stores, and he recommended a bewildering array of books and forms to deal with all eventualities, including packing, shipping and returned goods. Chapter five dealt with *'Dressmakers', Milliners' and Workroom Accounts'*. He recommended the keeping of stock books and dockets by which the workrooms could order materials from the rest of the store and recharge it to the customer. The only example of such forms I have found are those which were used by Morris's Cambrian Warehouse in Barmouth in the 1890s⁸³. He also advised firms to keep Cost (lighting, heating, etc.) and Labour (wages) books to help them price work economically. The workroom should then keep an Invoice (purchases) book, a Goods on Approval book, a Returns (goods returned) book, a Debit Returns book, a

⁸³ National Library of Wales [ref. Morris]

Purchases Ledger (*'of the ordinary kind'*), a Sales Invoice book (the nearest thing to the daybooks most firms actually kept), a Sales Ledger (arranged by customer name), a Cash book (for receipts and payments) and a Private Ledger (for capital account, furniture and fittings, etc.). Few firms, even the large stores discussed in chapter four, kept anything like such a complex system of records.

Magdalene Dunbar in Leith ran a millinery business which was patronised by wealthy women. When she was declared bankrupt in 1816, the courts listed her business records *'viz, a Ledger, a Day Book, a Scroll or Waste Book, a Cash Book, an Invoice Book and a Book of Payments'*. This is interesting because it gives a complete list and we are not left to guess her system from a few random survivals. Her books were well kept and the reason for her bankruptcy has already been described - clients owed her huge sums of money for work already completed, leaving her unable to pay her own bills⁸⁴.

In February 1873 the Milliners' Dressmakers' and Warehouseman's Gazette carried an article on *'drapery frauds'* explaining how various individuals (the most plausible of whom was apparently a ladies' maid) were obtaining goods on false pretences by putting in fake orders in the name of regular customers. The magazine urged its readers to keep proper client books because *'reference to a file of bills is too tedious in the pressure of daily business'*. But in 1895 a pamphlet appeared by 'Scissors' entitled Why Dressmaking does not pay. One of 'Scissors'' many criticisms of the profession was that *'Many dressmakers keep no book --'*⁸⁵. She pointed out that it was an offence under the Bankruptcy Act not to keep proper records, and advised that at the very least, small firms should keep day books as a record of what had been agreed, thus avoiding disputes with customers. This implies that as late as 1895 there were firms that kept no records at all.

Efficient record keeping was not always the key to success. The McCleod sisters in Edinburgh kept immaculately neat day books, but the entries are not all in sequence and are interspersed with notes about what clients owed and what they had spent on straw plait, bits are cut out and pages are missing⁸⁶. Luck and Sons in Darlington kept the most haphazard of records - all sorts of different accounts, out of order, in books with misleading titles - but nonetheless ran a perfectly successful business⁸⁷. J and D Mitchell,

⁸⁴ Edinburgh RO CS96/3562

⁸⁵ 'Scissors', Why Dressmaking Does Not Pay (1895) p.9

⁸⁶ Edinburgh RO CS96/3824-25

⁸⁷ Durham RO Acc 134(D) Ref D/LU

drapers and milliners in Dysart, with another branch in Pathhead, kept execrable records. Like most firms they kept a day book - and they were a large enough firm to keep separate day books for the drapery and millinery parts of their business. A heavy pencil cross through an entry denoted payment had been made, but the book is hopelessly untidy, the assistants' handwriting uniformly illegible and entries were interspersed with pencil lists of prices⁸⁸.

Accounts were kept in all sorts of odd books - paper was expensive in the 19th century and books were often re-used. A draper's day book in Leicester Record Office is to be found amongst the papers of Thomas Deacon, clockmaker of Lutterworth. The book was originally a customer's account book, covering the period 1833-48, probably for William Hackett, tailor, grocer and draper of Barlestone near Market Bosworth⁸⁹. The Hacketts and Deacons were related by marriage. Later, the clock maker used the back of it to record cleaning and repairing clocks⁹⁰. Elizabeth Edwards, a Welshpool milliner, kept her 1859 day book in a book that had been used for several other purposes. Part of it contains legal cases written in a beautiful ornate hand in 1771, by, or for, Thomas Griffiths of Clifford's Inn. Other names appear in the front, including Mary Ellen Edwards '*saddler*' and Jane Edwards, who were, perhaps, relatives of Elizabeth's⁹¹. Miss Clarke, dressmaker in Guildford, kept her 1873-1883 accounts in the back of a school exercise book. The book is full of mathematical problems, written out in the most beautiful copper plate script, and almost all of them refer to business activities. The script is very similar to that used for the dressmaker's account, which raises the question of whether Miss Clarke was also a school teacher, or perhaps re-using one of her childhood books⁹².

Mrs Pattinson of Ulverston kept a monthly profit and loss account in pencil, on the back of the calendars she received from John Weeks, the local stationer; those for 1895 and 1897 survive. There are two columns per month, one headed 'Expenditure' the other, presumably, her income. The smaller total is subtracted - it was usually expenditure - from the greater. The same process was repeated, this time on Birkett's calendars, for 1900-1903. Unfortunately, there is little evidence in these pencilled columns -

⁸⁸ University of Glasgow Business Records Centre CS245/1434/5

⁸⁹ However, another draper Hackett, Richard '*grocer and draper*' also appears in the 1840s Leicestershire directories.

⁹⁰ Leics RO 9D51/I/20

⁹¹ National Library of Wales [JR Hughes mss and papers 127]

⁹² Surrey RO Ref 1261

where any description is added it is usually just a letter or impenetrable abbreviation. She kept receipts in large bundles, roughly in date order, bundles of correspondence, and grubby stock books, in pencil scribble, filling at least two small notebooks a year. Her records were, nonetheless, more complete than the records that usually survive for such small businesses⁹³.

Occasionally records survive that illuminate unusual aspects of the trade. Shepherd and Manning in Northampton kept beautifully neat books, and amongst them is a scrap book of printed matter and advertisements produced by the firm between 1862 and 1909, together with notes of the printing costs. Printers charges would have varied a little, but this document is a useful guide to costs. In 1862 a two column advert for mourning in the local paper The Northampton Herald and Mercury, cost 2s-6d for 13 insertions, and a slightly longer one for '*Spring novelties*' cost 3s-6d. A single insertion of a similar advertisement for bridal wear cost 3s, or £1-12s-6d for a quarter, £2-12s-0d for a half year or £4-10s-0d for a full year - which goes some way to explaining the repetitive nature of much newspaper advertising at this date. They also produced coloured stickers for promotions and a pro-forma letter which began '*We very respectfully call your attention to your Account which has been standing since ---*'⁹⁴.

Two collections of employees' references survive in Ipswich and they, too, are exceptional⁹⁵. The only other comparable surviving records were kept by Lucks of Darlington. They show that by the middle of the century, workers in the drapery and dressmaking trades moved about a surprising amount. Few workers stayed with one employer for very long and many moved after a few months. As shops became larger and the turnover of staff increased, it became difficult for employers to keep track of their staff - which may account for the quite frequent references to dishonest workpeople. The system of keeping some sort of staff book was established and these are very informative. There was no freedom of information legislation in place, and employers were often extraordinarily frank about their employees, commenting on aspects of their appearance and competence that would seem to be largely irrelevant.

Polly White, dressmaker at Luck's in 1892 was described as '*a moderate hand, rather sprawly writer, would do fairly under another*' and Miss Page, overseer of their work room in 1890 who was actually dismissed for stealing, was described as being fat, having a '*blinking left eye*' and being a drinker. Lucks

⁹³ Cumbria RO BDB/38

⁹⁴ Northants RO ZA 666 8

⁹⁵ For Turner of Stowmarket (HC425) and [White's of Ipswich]

dismissed her, but also felt no qualms about sacking another employee they distrusted, despite the fact he was acquitted in court *'1886 Mr Kirkbright - believed to have embezzled 10s goods supplied to Maggie Denby. Case dismissed by magistrates'*⁹⁶.

Clements and Newling of the Draper's Stationery Warehouse, 96, Wood Street, Cheapside, London actually printed what they called *'Drapers' engagement books'*. These were landscape shaped books with a pro-forma contract on the right hand page with blanks to fill in the employee's name, salary etc, and with the left hand page divided into two parts, one for details of where the employee came from and a synopsis of the reference he or she had received from their previous employer, the other for details of their next job and a synopsis of the reference they had been given on leaving. (Plates 25 a and b) Three of these - covering the period 1873-90 - survive amongst the papers of William Turner of Stowmarket. Turner was a draper but in the 1880's he established millinery and dressmaking workrooms.

W E White of Ipswich also kept appointment books in the 1850s and 60s, but he was much less fortunate in his staff than was Mr Turner. In 1869 he was forced to dismiss Ms Etherington from Petersfield because *'---her behaviour was so bad and her influence so very injurious to the house that I abruptly dismissed her — very extravagant and very wasteful'*. Miss Goodchild from Fareham left *'having been accustomed to the carriage trade and was frightened of the work here'* (for which she received a mere £18 pa). Miss Proudman of Tamworth who worked for White's from February 1874 to November 1875 was described in doggerel:-

*'A rustic beauty with a skin as fair
As lilies show in balmy morning air
Her teeth were pearls, her eyes soft radiance shed
But I must tell the truth - her hair was red'*.

Pre-Raphaelite looks obviously had no place in an Ipswich draper's shop. One cannot, however, accuse Mr White of sexism - he was just as cavalier and rude in his descriptions of his male employees. Mr Locke from Guernsey, a shop man, was:-

*'A clever man in his native land
But too big a fool for England.
He went back to Guernsey of his own free will
And for the good of the world I hope he's there still'*⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Durham RO D/LU 45

⁹⁷ Suffolk RO [White of Ipswich]

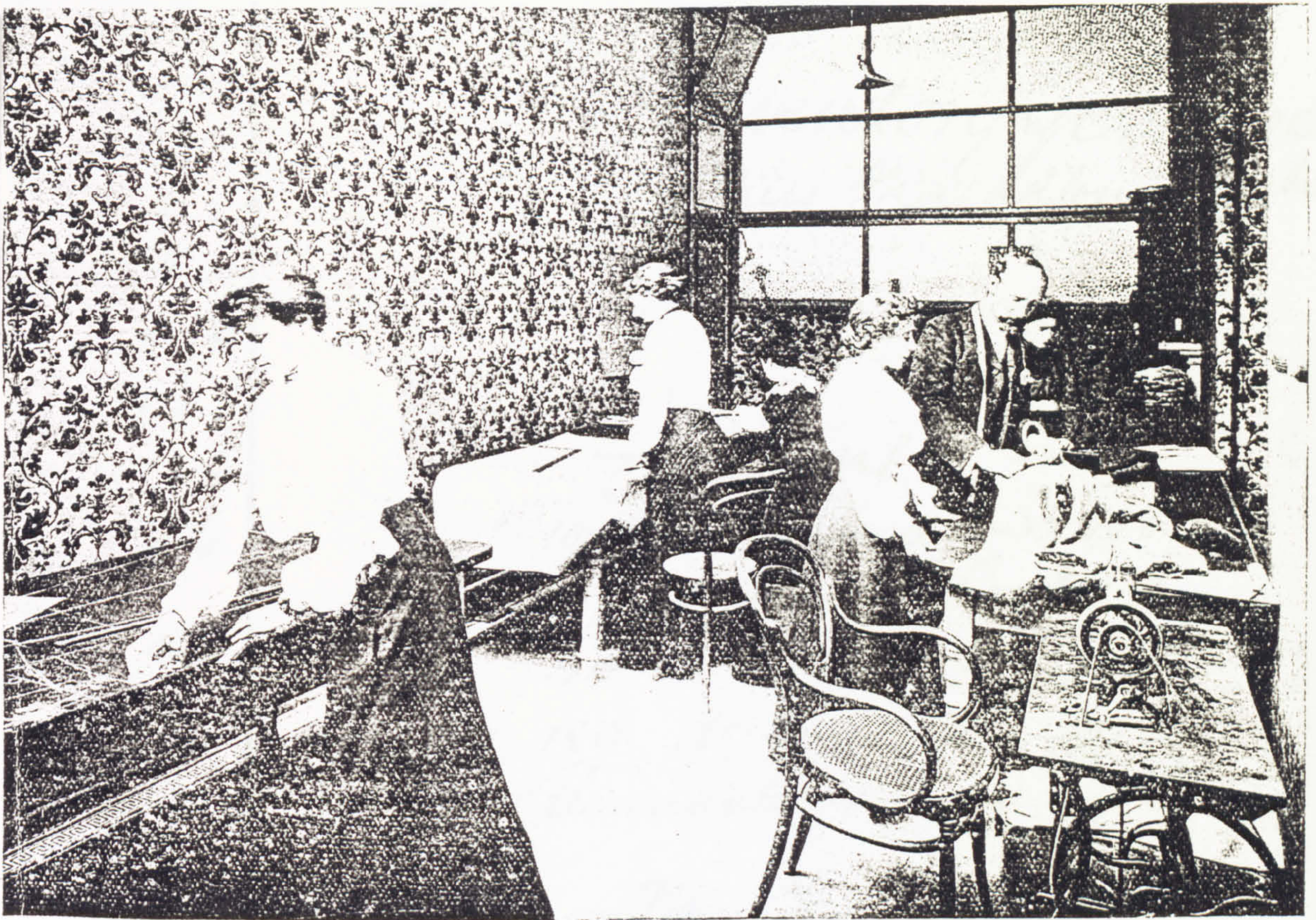
We shall encounter the unlovely Mr White again in chapter three.

Conclusion

The surviving records of dressmaking businesses are fragmentary but there is a much to be learned from them. They show there were many ways of learning the trade - by formal or informal apprenticeship, by attending a structured course or by simply having a flair for the work. Some girls went on to further training as improvers - with or without paying a premium - others by-passed this stage and obtained junior workroom posts; a few rose to become first hands or to run their own firms. It was possible to set up in business in a single room with just a table, a mirror, a pair of scissors, packets of needles and pins and a few fashion plates; alternatively, equipping luxurious premises or setting up a workroom to employ large numbers of staff could cost hundreds of pounds. Some employers were unreasonable, others acted almost as surrogate mothers. Some dressmakers took pleasure in their work, others resented every stitch. Wealthy ladies patronised dressmakers, but so did working men's wives, servant girls and prostitutes. Firms existed to serve all parts of the social spectrum and all classes expected a high level of service and complained when it was not forthcoming.

From the little evidence that survives, many dressmakers seem to have been on surprisingly equal terms with their clients. *'It needs a lady to make a bonnet for a lady'* was a favourite saying of one of Leicester's premier milliners, Mrs Wardle of Cheapside. Mrs Wardle's brother was a Cabinet minister⁹⁸. But even if many people chose to be served by women whose social status most closely approximated to their own, most of them were anxious to pay as little for their clothes as they possibly could, and many dressmakers found themselves unable to manage on the tiny profit margins they could allow themselves; some went bankrupt, others closed down, many struggled and all passed the problem down to their employees in the form of low wages. It was much the same whether the clients were rich or poor. Agnes Dow, catering for the wealthy and titled in Leith went bankrupt - as did Mary Kemp, working for a working class drapery business in York. The picture that emerges from a disparate mass of data is surprisingly coherent. But the most important feature of any trade is its profitability. We will look at the issues of wages, prices and profits in more detail in the next chapter.

⁹⁸ Quoted by Ellis, Isabel C, *Nineteenth Century Leicester* (1935), pp.117-118. Mrs Wardle's brother was Anthony John Mundella (1825-97), a Nottingham hosiery manufacturer, and radical Liberal MP for Sheffield (1868-85) and Brightside (1885-97). He was largely responsible for procuring the 1876 and 1881 Education Acts and created the Labour Department of the Board of Trade.



Cutting Room on Ground Floor reserved for Lady Students.

Plate 19. The ladies' cutting room at the Tailor and Cutter Academy in Gerrard Street, London, from their prospectus *A Cutter's Guide* (c.1900) (Cambs. RO)



Plate 20. Upper Brook Street. Mrs Pattinson's shop was the tiny, single-storey building which is now part of Nevinsom's Carpets. The shop windows probably date back to her day. She lived further up the street, at number eight, next door to her parents at number ten. The two houses were identical, stone built, three-storeys high, similar to the Animal Welfare shop in the picture. Mrs Pattinson's shop may have been tiny, but it was in the town centre, just off King Street, and barely a stone's throw from her in-laws at the Hare and Hounds public house.

129
 14 "
 14 "
 154
 144
 126
 26
 156
 1610
 7 "
 8.6
 74
 3
 171
 187
 163
 76
 11 "
 17
 3 "
 14 "

Inventory of the Stock of Miss Madeleine Dunbar

Ribbons

100 yards — @ 2^d — 168
 147 do — 5^d — 1 3
 41 do — 7^d — 1 3 11
 189 do — 10^d — 7 17 6
 Remnants — 10 6 13 9 10

Muslins

3 yards Cambric @ 4^d — 12 "
 9 1/4 " Lining — 1/4 " 9 3
 2 1/2 " fine Laps worth
 at 15^d — 1 17 6
 2 1/2 " do — 10/6 — 1 6 3
 4 1/2 " Tambour — 7/6 — 1 12 9
 3 3/4 " plain Book — 4/4 — 15 "
 3 Rolls of Muslin — 12^d — 1 16 "
 1 piece of Calcut — 10 6
 3 yards Muslin @ 1^d — 3 " 9 3 3

Beads blisps & Ornaments.

£ 22.13 1

M. H. Brown

Plate 21. Sample page from the inventory of Madeleine Dunbar's stock in 1816 compiled by W.H.Brown, the sequestrator. In total, her stock was valued at £235-12s-8d.

(For ready Money Only.)

THOMAS LOMAS,
LINEN-DRAPER, MERCER, and
HABERDASHER.

At his Shop in the Market-Place, LEICESTER. 1784

Sells the following Articles Wholesale and Retail, upon the most
reasonable Terms.

IRISH linens and sheetings of every breadth and sort	Shirt buttons
The greatest variety of printed linens, cottons, calicoes, & chints	Sewing silk of all sorts
Mullins, plain, flower'd & strip'd	Barbers and netting ditto
Ditto handkerchiefs and neckcloths	Stay trimmings all sorts
Long and clear lawns	Velvet collars
Winchelsea and Scotch cambricks	Gauzes and gauze handkerchiefs, a great variety
Flaxen linen	Tiffanies of all sorts
Russia diaper and huckabacks	Modes, persians and farsnets
Hempen and flaxen Russias	Plain and figur'd silks and sattins
Russia drabs and ravenducks	Dutch lace
Diaper and damask table cloths of all sorts	Plain figur'd and love ribbons
Linen and cotton checks of all breadths	Mode and sattin hats and cloaks
Furniture checks and trimmings for beds	Leghorn, covering, and fine chip hats
Strip'd cottons and linens	Scarlet and beaver cardinals
Nankeens and brown flannels	Green oil cloth
Printed linen and cotton handkerchiefs all sorts	Marseilles quilting
Check ditto	Counterpanes
Silk and lincee ditto	Burton, Wildbore, and all kinds of tammies
English and Scotch stitching and colour'd thread	Black shallcons and camblets
Scotch ounce and Lisle threads	A great variety of lustrings and fancy silks for gowns
Leather and jean gloves and mits	Stuff and silk petticoats
Green netting silk for purses	Manchester gowns
Flourishing, tambour and knotting cottons	Silky stuffs, all sorts
Manchester uncle, tapes and filletings	Furr trimmings and gimps
Holland and diaper ditto	Black crapes and bombazeens
Broad and narrow worsted quality	Black lustrings and armozeeens for gowns
Galloons and terrors	A large assortment of black and white lace
Cotton, terror and silk laces	Blond lace
Pins and needles	Purle twist in plain colours & shades
Skeleton and skain wires	Scotch gauze with or without the threads drawn
	Plain and spotted lenau
	Lenau handkerchiefs

With every other Article in the Linen Drapery, Mercery, and
Haberdashery Business.

Plate 24. Hand bill for Thomas Lomas, Leicester draper and haberdasher, 1784.

Character Received with Miss E. Knott from
Mr Barrett of Peterborough Feb 1888
who state her to be excellent fit pleasing man
address honest steady, rather hysterical
at times short tempered as dressmaker &

The above E. Knott left my employ on aug 10 1889
and the Character following was given to Miss Beecroft of Luton 1889 2.
excitable temperament, hysterical good
style any extra pressure work liable to
break down, with hysterical fits good opinion
of herself

12 March 1888
Miss Knott
I hereby agree to serve you to the best of my
abilities as Fresh and Dressmaker in consideration
~~of my own feelings and satisfaction~~ and after the rate of
Seven pounds per Annus
and to abide by all rules and regulations now in force, or that may
be made for the management of your Establishment, and that
1 week notice shall be sufficient to terminate this agreement
Signed, E. Knott

Plates 25 a and b. Sample pages from Clement's Engagement Book for Drapers, Milliners and Dressmakers kept by William Turner of Stowmarket. It relates to Miss Knott, who was his first hand dressmaker from March 1888 to August 1889 at a wage of £70 a year. She came to him from Barrett's of Peterborough and left him to go to Beecroft's in Luton. Mr Turner described her qualities thus 'excitable temperament, hysterical, good fit and style, any extra pressure work liable to break down with hysterical fits, good opinion of herself'.



Walking-Dress



Evening-Dress

Plate 26.

Page from The Ladies' Remembrancer, a pocket diary which cost 2s-6d - for 1830. Actual size. Ladies' diaries often contained fashion plates. (Keele University Library, Special Collections)

Chapter three

Wages, prices and profits

*'How little can the rich man know
Of what the poor man feels
When Want, like some dark demon foe,
Nearer and nearer steals!'*

(Manchester song, quoted by Mrs Gaskell in Mary Barton, 1848)

The development of the dressmaking trade mirrored the shifts and turns of the national economy¹. The early part of our period, c.1780-c.1816, was a time of unrest and rising prices. There were a series of bad harvests; there was social upheaval caused by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation in Britain; there was a revolution in France and wars throughout Europe. But nonetheless the economy was vibrant, the population was growing and the pace of fashion change was speeding up, so the dressmaking trade was buoyant.

By 1816, prices in Britain had reached an all-time high; they then fell until 1820 when inflation stabilised, and for the next seventy-five years prices for goods other than food remained remarkably static. Food production, however, was affected by the weather, and when the price of bread rose after a bad harvest, the poor were the first to suffer. Consequently the early 19th century was a period of intermittent uprisings among the working poor. For several years harvests were bad. Demobbed soldiers returning from the Napoleonic wars swelled the ranks of the unemployed. Luddite workers damaged machines in protest at the low wages and over-production the machines were thought to have caused. There was much unrest, and the government, remembering the revolution that had so recently taken place in France, feared that a protesting crowd could easily turn into a rioting mob, and legislated to ban demonstrations. One of the results was the Peterloo massacre which took place in 1819 in Manchester when the Volunteers fired on a peaceful, unarmed crowd listening to Henry 'Orator' Hunt speaking about parliamentary reform. In the South East in the 1830s there were riots amongst the agricultural workers, led by the mythical 'Captain Swing', protesting about unemployment in agriculture, the threshing machines that were felt to be putting men out of work and the inadequacy of poor relief. In 1834 six Dorset farm labourers in the village of Tolpuddle were caught swearing allegiance to their local farm-workers union, and transported. The landed interest was running scared. Fear of the high numbers of

¹ For a more sophisticated review of the economic trends discussed in this section, see Fischer, D H, The Great Wave. Price Revolutions and the Rhythm of History (1996) pp.121-177

unruly unemployed brought about changes to the Poor Laws in 1834 and the introduction of the hated Union workhouses. Some parliamentary reform was achieved in 1832, but the franchise was still very limited. Desperate to have a political voice, working men swore allegiance to the Charter (published in 1838), and Chartist rallies, agitating for the repeal of the corn laws, universal male suffrage and the rights of the common man, caused yet more unrest and fear of revolution. As in other trades, conditions in dressmaking were at their worst in the 1820s and 30s.

Gradually, as we saw in chapter one, government introduced rudimentary employment legislation. The repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 addressed the problem of the cost of bread despite opposition by landowners who stood to benefit from high prices. But bad harvests in the 1840s, and the failure of the potato crop in the middle of the decade, created great misery, and an outbreak of cholera in 1848, at its worst in the insanitary slums of the big cities, caused the government to declare a series of 'general fasts' during which the populace was urged to pray for help. After three decades of deteriorating conditions things had come to a head. The 1840s saw ugly riots in towns all over the country; ricks were burnt and houses were attacked.

However, the prevailing view at government level was that poverty was somehow the fault of the individual, and this, coupled with continuing fear of revolution, delayed attempts to remedy workers' grievances, though various enquiries were instigated - including, as we have already seen, the first Children's Employment Commission which reported in 1843. The outrage which this report provoked had some effect in ameliorating conditions.

In the 1850s and 1860s, dressmakers, along with the rest of the workforce, began to see some improvement in their lot. For many people the middle years of the 19th century were a golden age of prosperity. Britain's industries were the most productive in the world. In 1870 her foreign trade was worth four times that of the USA and more than the combined trades of France, Germany and Italy. She grew three-quarters of the food she needed, and most of her imports of foodstuffs and raw materials came from her Empire. Assisted emigration (and, up to 1867, enforced transportation) meant the Empire was also a safety valve for the problems caused by unrest and unemployment at home. Real wages and prices rose steadily from 1850 to 1870 and most working class families experienced a 10% increase in their spending power over that period. Consequently there was more demand for goods and services and more opportunity for profit. Women's dress reflected their husband's wealth and their family's

aspirations and women's garments became increasingly cumbersome and elaborate. Even working women dressed fashionably. (Plate 27) The dressmaking trade experienced a boom.

But it was too good to last. From 1870 to 1873 wages and prices rose sharply, only to slump disastrously in 1874. Firstly there was an agricultural depression. Secondly, Britain was a manufacturing nation, dependent on raw materials from abroad and on foreign markets to buy her goods, but by the mid-1870s she found herself in competition with Germany and the USA. The balance of trade turned. Real wages and prices fell. But the working class was increasingly literate, organised and assertive. The Trades Union Act of 1871 gave trades unions legal status, and from 1868 the Trades Union Council met annually. The boom of the early 70s had encouraged workers to combine to press for improvements in pay and conditions. After 1875 their activities were directed to fighting wage cuts and unemployment. While unionised workers had a little bargaining power, workers like dressmakers, who had no such organisation, were seriously disadvantaged; for many, conditions deteriorated markedly after 1874. In addition, their clients had less money to spend on clothes, production of ready-made garments increased and home dressmaking became popular, helped by the development of paper patterns.

Conditions remained bad in the 1880s and unemployment was high. There was a temporary improvement in 1893-4 and again around the turn of the century, but the depression lasted until 1914. Britain was at the mercy of international markets over which she had little control and her population was growing. As we saw in chapter one, various bodies and individuals instigated enquiries into the lifestyles of the poorest sections of society and produced horrifying findings. It emerged that market forces had created a large class of people, who, through no fault of their own, had to work desperately hard in dreadful conditions for grossly inadequate rates of pay. Many of them worked in the garment trades and some of them were bespoke dressmakers - wages in dressmaking actually declined between 1880 and 1914. But though there was a clearer understanding of the causes of poverty than there had been earlier in the century, there was disagreement about how it could best be alleviated. Consequently, legislation to create Wage Boards to establish and enforce minimum wages did not reach the statute books until 1909.

Fabrics

Labour costs were the least part of the price of a new dress or hat. Most fabrics came in narrow widths - 18 or 22 inches for silks in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It was unusual even in 1880 to find any fabric wider than 36 inches, though a few woollens (broadcloths) did come in 60 inch widths². Consequently, dresses required considerable lengths of material. A simple 18th century 'open robe' took at least seven yards of material and Cunningham estimated that the trained evening dresses of the early part of the 19th century took 10 to 12 yards. As dresses got fuller in the middle years of the century those yardages increased. The olive green silk dress of 1840 (number 10, plate 72) and the blue and green striped silk one of 1865 (number 15, plate 77) described in chapter six, took seven and nine breadths of fabric respectively for the skirts alone, and each breadth was over a yard long. In the 1870s and 80s skirts were less full, but were elaborately draped, kilted and trimmed, so there was little saving in the quantity of material needed. In addition, throughout our period, dresses had fully-lined bodices and sometimes skirts and sleeves were also lined. The outlay on fabric and trimmings was considerable for even quite an ordinary dress.

All the fabrics in use throughout our period were natural - silks, wools, cottons and linens, or combinations of them. Even small drapers carried extensive stocks, and most drapers travelled to the cloth making areas themselves to purchase stock. Cole and Company of Leicester's advertisement in the Leicester Herald and General Advertiser on October 10th, 1827 is quite typical. They had just acquired

'-- extensive and prime stock of West of England cloths consisting partly of Saxony blacks, blues, olives, browns and greens with prime drabs and other colours, Kerseymeres, Yorkshire broad and narrow cloths for ladies pelisses, habits and children's wear, plaid and plain cloths and frizes for cloaks, an extensive assortment of twill'd stuffs, figured ditto and Scotch and Yorkshire plaids, added to which is a general stock of linen drapery, silk mercery, in part consisting of Norwich crapes, lutestrings, Swiss dresses, Manchester and London prints, silk shawls --'

² Part 1 of the Dressmakers' Chart and Cutting Guide 1888-9 included a list of fabrics and the widths they came in. Alpaca was 30, 36 or 54 inches wide and woollen cloth and tweed came in 38, 54 and 60 inch widths. Cashmere, merino and some fine woollens could come in 44 or 46 inch widths, while serges were sometimes 32 inches wide, but none of the other materials listed exceeded 30 inches and silks - '*fancy materials like broches, pekings, crepe de chine*s — are all very narrow, less than 27 inches.'

The following lists of prices give some idea of fabric costs at various dates. They are arranged in date order by source and the prices are per yard of material.

1785-6 Wholesale prices paid by Thomas, drapers of Hinckley.³ They were a small town firm and bought from Leicester dealers in small quantities.

glazed linen 1s; crepe gauze 1s-1d; purple cotton 2s-1d; chocolate cotton 2s-2d; fine drab shaloon 1s-8d* and 2s-2d; chintz calico 2s-3d, 2s-4d, and 2s-10 ½d; superfine woollen cloth 5s-9d and 4s-10d; check silk 7s; *satines* £1-2s-6d

The State of the Poor by Sir Frederic Eden, 1797 (pp. 556-7)

woollen cloth for a labourer's coat 2s-6d, linen for underwear 1s-5d

Family papers of the Greys of Dunham Massey⁴

1800 taffeta 6s-6d (from Jos and Wm King, mercers, London)

striped worked muslin 7s-6d (from Steven and Barclay, London)

1814 white satin 10s-6d (from D and P Cooper, silk merchants, London)

1815 striped satin 8s-6d (from D and R Hodges, silk manufacturers, London)

Clement Winstanley of Beaumanor, April 23, 1817, bill from G B Hodges⁵

glazed calico 6d; calico 1s-2d; flannel 2s-4d; fine black shaloon 2s-8d*; fine black cloth 9s; 'botil' green cloth 9s; crimson cloth 10s,

Advertisements in the Leicestershire Herald and General Advertiser in 1827 and 1828

J Cooper, July 18th: holland 1s-6d to 2s-9d**; best lutestrings 3s-6d***

R Willey, October 3rd: Barnsley shirting linens 6d; tartan plaids 1s-1d and 1s-2d; pelisse cloths 2s and upwards#; ladies' habit cloths (30 shades) 4s-6d to 9s

J Winder bankrupt stock, May 14th 1828

Norwich crapes 10½d; lutestrings 2s-6d; gros de Naples 2s-10d (*worth 3/9*)##; superfine blue broadcloth 2 yards wide 4s-9d

B Thomas of Helston 1847-50 daybook⁶

calico 3d; shirt cotton 9d

Cockshutt and Preston of Kendall, 1868-70 daybook⁷

velvet ribbon 2 ½d to 7d; lining muslin 4 ½d; satin ribbon 1s-10d; paramatta 2s+++; white grenadine 2s-2d*#; French merino 3s; tweed 5s-6d to 11s

Susanna Ingleby's personal account book⁸

December 1870: scarlet flannel 1s-2d; **July 1871:** violet silk 10s-9d; **June 1872:** twilled calico 8½d; black muslin 6d; black moire 2s; pink glazed calico 10½d; **September 1879:** velvet 7d, January 1876: violet and black silk 2s-4½d

³ Leics RO, DE446/1

⁴ John Rylands Library, Manchester, Dunham Massey papers 4/1/6/19/1-18 and 72-81

⁵ Leics RO, Winstanley mss DG5/721

⁶ University of Glasgow Business Records Centre, HF24/1

⁷ Ibid DB96/1

⁸ Private collection

Ellen Cutmore of Ware's 1876 daybook⁹

holland 2 ½d to 1s; calico 4d to 6d; muslin 4 ½d to 6d; lawn 6d; silesia 5d to 6½d**#; jeanette 7d+; linsey 6d to 7 ½d++; flannel 1s-4d and 1s-11d; alpaca 1s-6d; plaid 1s-6d; merino 1s-9d; velveteen 2s-8d; velvet 4s-6d; waterproof 4s-11d to 6s-11d

* a type of lining fabric- a loosely woven, twilled worsted; **linens; ***a type of glossy corded silk; # pelisses were light-weight coats; ## a corded Italian silk; + a heavy cotton; ++ wool and cotton mixture; +++ fine matt worsted/cotton mixture, much used for mourning; *# an open weave silk or silk/wool gauze; **# a fine, brown glazed linen¹⁰

Wage patterns

Though the perception of dressmaking (see chapter one) was that it was an impoverished profession, dressmakers were not uniquely underprivileged. Nineteenth century wages were low in many trades. Throughout the century, a pound a week was reckoned to be the decent minimum on which a respectable working man could maintain a family, but many men earned a great deal less. Charles Booth discovered that, in the 1880s, the earnings of some 178,000 East Enders fell below what he defined as the poverty line of '*18s to 21s per week for a moderate family*'¹¹. Even some professional men did not earn significantly more - 19th century schoolmasters' salaries, for example, ranged from £50 to £100 a year. Against this clerks earned £200- 260 while the average annual earnings for clergymen and upper civil servants were £200 -300¹².

But dressmakers were women. Women earned less than men and fewer employment opportunities were open to them. Before we can assess the dressmaking trade properly we need to look at the alternative

⁹ Herts RO (acc2703)

¹⁰ For further information about fabric names see Cunnington, C W and P, English Womens Clothing in the Nineteenth Century, (1937) glossary pp.429-436

¹¹ Op cit, Fried and Elman, (1971) pp.54-63

¹² Jackson, R V 'Pay in nineteenth century Britain' in The Economic History Review, 2nd series, Vol XL, No 4 (Nov 1987) p.563. Jackson quotes Williamson, R G British Inequality (1986) and though he disagrees with Williamson's findings about the pay of doctors and solicitors he agrees with the estimates for other salaries. Part of the pay table is reproduced below:-

	Nominal annual earnings in skilled occupations (£)		
	1815	1851	1871
Government high wage	195.16	234. 87	281.02
Clergy	272.53	267. 09	293.84
Clerks	200.79	235. 81	268.63
Schoolmasters	51.10	81.11	97.02

forms of employment that were available to girls and women, the levels of remuneration they provided and the attitudes that kept women's wages low.

Throughout our period most working women were domestic servants¹³. The wages of female servants usually included their board and lodging - as was also the case in parts of the dressmaking trade. In the early 18th century Defoe claimed that '*women servants are now so scarce that from Thirty Shillings to Forty Shillings a Year, their Wages are increased to Six, Seven and Eight Pounds per Annum*'¹⁴. Over a hundred years later there were still young servant girls working for that sort of wage. In 1861 Mrs Beeton listed servants' wages ranging from £5-£9 pa for a scullery maid through to £14-£30 pa for a cook¹⁵.

In the towns factories provided jobs for large numbers of females, especially in the textile trades. However, as late as 1906-7 in the cotton industry 40% of women earned under 16s a week while in the woollen industry 70% earned less than 14s¹⁶. Earnings were even lower in some trades. Women in the pottery industry earned 9s - 12s a week in the first half of the 19th century¹⁷; by 1906-7 82.5% of them still earned less than 15s and 36% earned under 10s¹⁸. Many firms paid piecework rates, which they adjusted to prevent workers earning too much. Ada Jackson, making caps for Thomas Webster and Co of Leicester recorded delightedly in her diary on December 1st, 1883 '*I have got more money this week than I have ever got in my life, 13s-8d only fancy, I must not get too much or I will have my work docked*'¹⁹. Those who had to work from home found a variety of outwork tasks for manufacturers such as making garments, artificial flowers, valentines, boxes or packaging small items for sale. Most earned less than 8s a week²⁰.

¹³ See Introduction, footnote 1

¹⁴ Op cit, Clark, Alice (1968) pp. 156-7

¹⁵ Beeton, Mrs Isabella, The Book of Household Management (1861, facsimile edition, 1968) p.8

¹⁶ Morris, Jenny, Women Workers (1986) pp.68-73

¹⁷ Haggard, R G, Mountford, A R & Thomas J, The Staffordshire Pottery Industry (1981) p.48

¹⁸ Op cit, Morris (1986) pp.68-73

¹⁹ Blow, M M, The Diary of Ada Jackson (1993) p.125

²⁰ Smith, R M, Handbook of the Daily News exhibition, (May 1906)

In the countryside women were employed in agriculture. Such work was seasonal and wages were uniformly low. Some women worked from home, plaiting straw, knitting or making lace but again the profitability of such work fluctuated and few home workers earned more than 8s a week²¹. By the second half of the 19th century many women found employment as school teachers. Second year pupil teachers earned £20 a year, while a certificated woman teacher earned, on average, just £58 in 1870²².

In fact the average female weekly wage in 1888 was found to be just 12s-8d for women and 7s for girls²³. Against these figures, dressmakers' wages do not look quite so bad.

There were several reasons why women's wages remained low. Comparatively few women were sole breadwinners - though those that were were heavily disadvantaged. Women's wages were seen as supplementary to the family income or as pocket money for girls. Men were believed to be physically stronger and thus more able workers. A high proportion of the female labour force consisted of girls and young women who commanded little respect and had little bargaining power, whereas in the male sector their cohort was balanced by a much higher percentage of experienced older men. Much women's work was unskilled and had come about as production processes became more and more fragmented; women were channelled into this unskilled work because their employment was seen as essentially temporary, something that would cease on marriage. In the workplace, women and men worked separately and at different tasks which made it easier to maintain wage differentials. As the population expanded jobs became scarcer and male workers and employers alike were anxious to restrict women's work²⁴. While dressmaking did not fit any of these criteria exactly, women's wages in other areas coloured expectations, even within a skilled female trade.

²¹ See for example Perkin, Joan, Victorian Women (1994) chapter 9, Luck, Lucy, A Little of My Life (1993) and Inder, PM, Honiton Lace (Exeter Museums) (1971) pp. 25-29 and the Children's Employment Commission Vol X for interviews with needleworkers, lacemakers and straw plaiters.

²² Horn, Pamela, The Victorian and Edwardian Schoolchild (1989) pp. 165-7

²³ Op cit Morris (1986) p.12

²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see op cit Morris (1986) pp.84-101

Prices

The price of making a dress varied, as we shall see below, from around 1s-6d to £1 in the 18th century and from about 2s-6d to 10s in the 19th century. To put these figures in some sort of context it is useful to look at the prices of other goods and services. The figures below are taken from a collection of diaries and account books kept by members of a Staffordshire gentry family.

18th century (1795-1800)²⁵

- Play (theatre ticket in London) 2s
- Needlework scissors 2s-6d
- Penknife 2s-6d
- English Reader (child's) 3s-6d
- Prayer book 4s
- Dinner in London 5s-6d
- A black lead pencil 6s
- Wedding ring 7s-6d
- Week's washing for one man visiting London 10s-10d
- 3 lbs tea 18s
- 4 pairs men's woollen stockings 19s
- Powder license £1-1s (license to wear hair powder)
- Year's pew rent £1-1s
- Varnishing a coach £1-5s
- One weeks lodging in London £1-1s
- Black pony £5-5s

19th century(1822-85)²⁶

- Tape 2d a yard
- Valentine card 4 ½ d
- Beef, 6d a lb
- Heeling boots 6d
- Wash leather 10d
- Calico 10 ½d a yard
- Photo of Royal Family 1s-6d
- 1 lb Swedish turnip seed 1s-6d
- Quire of paper 1s-9d
- ½ lb tea 2s-2d
- 500 mourning envelopes 5s
- Milton's poetry 5s
- Ton of coal 5s-10d
- Crinoline 7s
- Wheelbarrow 7s
- 2 ferrets 7s
- Pair of clogs 9s
- Pram £3
- Ayrshire twinter £7 (two year old heifer)
- Rent of a 4 bedroomed country house in Staffordshire £30 pa (1870)

Most of the 18th century prices were actually incurred in London, while the 19th century ones relate to expenditure in Oxford, London and Staffordshire. The key thing to notice about these figures is that the differentials between prices for various sorts of goods and services are quite different from those in force today. This makes it very difficult to analyse expenditure in the past.

Profits

This is the most difficult area in which to provide comparative data. It would, however, seem that most small businesses ran on very low profit margins. Using the Edinburgh bankruptcy records, Craig Young

²⁵ From the diaries of William Sneyd of Ashcombe Park in Staffordshire, Keele University Library Special Collection

²⁶ See Aldis, Marion and Inder, Pam, Thirty Pieces of Silver, the diary of the Rev John Sneyd 1815-1871 (1998) and the personal account books of Mrs Susanna Ingleby 1862-85 (private collection)

produced a list of sample annual profits and wages for several small firms in 19th century Perthshire. This is reproduced below.

19th century Perthshire businesses

Business	Year	Profit/earnings	Year	Journeyman's wage
Watchmaker	1862	+/-£150 (less £30 'expenses')	1862	£64
Carter	1864	£156 (less £56 living expenses)		
Watchmaker	1865	£78	1870	£41
Shoemaker	1878	£70 (which did not always 'exceed expenses')	1870	£52
Coachbuilder	1880	£47		
	1882	£65	1884	£40
Baker/grocer	1881	£150 (after paying for family's keep)		
Grocer	1899	£60-70	1894	£57
Shoemaker	1910	£52-65 ('clear') ²⁷		

Perthshire was not a wealthy county, and these were businesses that failed, but nonetheless they compare quite closely with my figures for small dressmaking firms. More information about larger firms appears in chapter four.

Introduction to the records

As we have seen, dressmaking firms did not keep copious records, but many small firms kept daybooks and quite a number of these still exist. Unfortunately, many of them survive because they were retained by the courts when their owner's businesses failed, so they do not depict the most healthy of organisations. The quality of record keeping also varied enormously. Daybooks, as the name implies, were used to record transactions on a daily basis, usually in date order. However, some firms recorded transactions by customer name while others worked on such a small scale that orders were recorded haphazardly, apparently on whichever page the book fell open at! Some books are neatly kept, others are faded, erased or illegible. It has not, therefore, been possible to analyse them all in the same way.

Wages, prices and estimated profits are all interconnected. Not all firms kept their records in the same way, and in some cases there are records only of wages or only of prices. Comparative analyses are therefore difficult, so I have chosen to subdivide my investigation by date and type of firm.

²⁷ Young, Craig, 'The Economic Characteristics of Small Craft Businesses in Rural Lowland Perthshire c.1830-c.1900', Business History, Vol 36 (October 1994) No 4

Dress prices in the 18th and early 19th centuries

For information about 18th century prices we are largely dependant on bills. These survive in surprising numbers, but though they tell us what individual customers paid, they are less informative about the makers' profit and tell us nothing at all about the volume of trade or how much the workers were paid. In default of other information, however, it is worth examining some examples.

Elizabeth Jervis of Meaford in Staffordshire, wife of a country gentleman and landowner, paid 12s in 1747 for having two gowns made and a further 2s-8d for having a 'taby' gown made. In 1748 she paid 6s-6d for the making of a stuff gown. Making a 'Bombazun sack and coat' cost 12s and making an 'armazeen sack and coat' cost £1 in 1756 ²⁸. These seem to have been London prices, for in 1754 she recorded 'Pd at Meaford for making nightgown 3s-6d'²⁹.

Prices changed little as the century progressed. An early bill for Thomas's, drapers of Hinckley, dated 30th July 1787, gives prices for women's work:

Making a silk gown	3s-0d
Making a new chemise	1s-9d
Making a morning gown	1s-6d
Making a morning coat	1s-6d
Making a morning gown	2s-0d
<u>Total 9s-9d</u> ³⁰	

Thomas's were a small town firm and their prices seem to have been on the low side.

The fashionable could pay much, much more. When Lady Amelia Grey (1779-1849) married John Lister Kaye of Grange near Wakefield, on October 18th, 1800, her trousseau was large and expensive. It included a black leghorn hat and a white muslin hat for £4-14s-6d from C Ausenel, milliner, in London, 2 cloaks from Tolman and Worthing (no address) for £5 and £9-1s-1d to Mary Deane for underwear. Amelia also paid £7-1s-1d to Lucy Hodgkinson of 'Dunham Town' (not far from Altrincham in Cheshire) near Amelia's home, Dunham Massey, for dressmaking. For this, Lucy made

'a brown muslin dress	3s-6d
a white muslin gown	5s-6d
its lining, etc	3s-6d
thin work and	6s-0d
muslin gown	3s-8d

²⁸ 'Sack' means a sacque-backed open robe. 'Coat' means matching underskirt or petticoat. 'Bombazun' was bombazeen, a wool worsted/cotton mixture: armazeen was a stout black silk

²⁹ Op cit, Hayden, Costume 22 (1988)

³⁰ Leics RO, DE446/1

2 cambric muslin gowns	5s-6d
and	3s-6d
Chapand muslin gown	6s-0d
and	4s-4d
spotted morning dress	5s-0d
and	3s-10d
striped muslin gown	6s-0d
and	3s-6d
thin muslin gown	7s-0d
and	3s-6d'

The second price seems to be for lining in each case. These are the prices for **making** - the fabric costs are listed separately. Amelia was wealthy and well connected and these prices represent the upper end of the dressmaker's price range³¹.

The top end is shown in the same set of papers from the Dunham Massey estate. In June 1814 the Greys were again in London. One of the daughters was being presented at court. Amongst other items, they bought a court dress from Elizabeth Sarel of 23, Berkeley Square, for 16 guineas and spent £23-3s with Thomas Hamilton, artificial florist, for '*fringes with roses, etc.*' and a court plume and head-dress. A year later Lady Louisa Grey was presented at court and her dress cost £20-4s-3d from Barber and Co of Pall Mall, milliners and dressmakers to the Princess of Wales³². But only the most prestigious of court dressmakers could charge so much and no provincial dressmaker could compete with them. It is with the provincial dressmakers that we are concerned.

While 18th century prices seem to have been rather higher than 19th century ones, there is little information about the wages work women received or the profits firms made. Campbell tells us that hands earned a bare 8s a week in 1747, and that high class establishments could make '*vast fortunes*' for their owners, but it is certain that the picture was more complicated than that. Fortunately there is a wider range of source material for the rest of the period.

Wages c.1800 - 1914

It is difficult to assess staff costs for many firms. Apprentices were usually unpaid, at least until the last quarter of the century and many respectable firms expected their apprentices to pay a premium. These ranged from round £10 to £80, paid in a lump sum or a series of lump sums. The apprentice would recoup some of that in free board and lodging for the period of her apprenticeship. Small dressmakers working

³¹ John Rylands Library, Dunham Massey Papers 4/1/6/19/1-18

³² Ibid, 4/1/6/21/72-81

on a narrow profit margin probably could not afford to feed themselves particularly well, so their apprentices fared even worse. Small firms demanded smaller premiums - or waived them altogether - so were more likely to employ girls from poor families. The quality of training these girls received varied enormously, and many were used as unpaid servants, as Hilda Winstanley was with Mrs Ormston in Manchester 14 Miles. The girl who replied to an advertisement like this -

'WANTED A respectable girl, about 14 years of age, to be APPRENTICED to the MILLINERY business, in a village, a few miles from Leicester. She will be treated with kindness and as one of the family'

was taking a calculated risk ³³.

Because they brought in an income and cost their employers very little, many firms had a number of apprentices. In September 1836 Miss Osborne moved her business to Hotel Street in Leicester. She advertised that she was employing an *'experienced assistant'* - and wanted two indoor apprentices. In December she advertised that she also needed *'several'* outdoor apprentices³⁴. 'Several' must mean at least two - so Miss Osborne and her assistant were running a business and trying to train four or more girls. Under such circumstances training was often minimal, and the girls were simply unpaid labour. As the century progressed, fewer firms demanded premiums, and few department stores expected them. H Gee's of Leicester advertised for out-apprentices in September 1872, for example, and specifically stated *'no premium'*.³⁵

Towards the end of the century apprentices began to receive wages, at least after the first year, and as we saw in chapter two, these usually increased by gradual annual increments until in their final year the apprentice was receiving a full wage. The situation was different for girls serving one or two year apprenticeships. They were likely to receive a minimal salary throughout their apprenticeship.

There are huge numbers of advertisements for apprentices. It seems likely that many girls dropped out of the trade during, or after, their apprenticeships, for there were fewer posts higher up the profession. Those girls who did see out their time went on to become *'improvers'*. Some employers demanded a premium for them, too. Some took improvers for free but did not pay them, others paid them a pittance.

³³ Leicester Daily Post, August 17th 1875

³⁴ In the Leicester Chronicle or Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser on September 21st and December 3rd.

³⁵ In the Leicester Post

There are far fewer advertisements for improvers - Mrs Holland's advertisement in the Leicester Post in May 1875 is one of the few I have found. Probably many girls simply stayed on with the firms which had trained them. Paying improvers became more usual later in the century - Soulsby's Ulverston Gazette carried an advertisement from P Butler and Sons, on May 23rd 1872: *'Improvers wanted, to whom a salary will be given'*. In old fashioned Ulverston this was obviously still unusual enough to warrant comment.

According to the Children's Employment Commission of 1864 the usual wage for 'assistants' (by which they seem to have meant second and third hands, the grades of workers above improvers) ranged from £8 to £16 a year (plus free board and lodging) to £30 to £70 a year in the 'best houses'. Day workers' ordinary wages varied between 8s and 12s a week in the West End (the same as the rate Campbell claimed was paid in 1747) though some specialist day workers were paid as much as 18s or 20s. In the provinces day workers were paid less - 5s-6d to 6s a week for ordinary workers and 11s to 12s for specialists. By 1864 there was also a new class of worker - sewing machinists. They tended to be well paid, usually earning something between 14s and 20s a week. First hands or forewomen were the elite of the profession and few in number; they could earn £80 to £120 a year. The commissioners interviewed several hundred women to arrive at these averages; nonetheless they do not always tally with firms' wages records. The conclusion must therefore be that dressmakers' pay varied enormously from firm to firm and from place to place.

For example, Agnes Dow of 45, Tolbooth Wynd, Leith described herself as a *'haberdasher'*, but employed a milliner. Leith was a fashionable area, and Mrs Dow was working for a well-to-do clientele. She went bankrupt in August 1834 and her debts included £16-1s-11d to a Miss Bell, milliner, for the period March to October. Miss Bell had lodged with her mistress, and the cost of this was assessed at £23-6s-8d for the same period, and this seems to have formed part of her wages - so Miss Bell's salary worked out at around £80 a year of which her lodging took well over half - a very respectable wage for a woman in the 1830s³⁶. In the 1880s, Hannah Mitchell started work as a part-trained apprentice in Glossop at 8s a week. She considered her final job to be quite well paid at 12s to 15s a week (£30-39 pa)³⁷.

³⁶ Edinburgh RO CS 235/ segn D1/41

³⁷ Op cit, Mitchell (1977) p.80

Meyer and Black did a survey of wages in the London garment trade in 1908 and found that they still varied wildly. Designers in first class houses earned up to £200 pa., but in one smart house the 'trotter' (or apprentice) earned just 4s-6d a week (£11-14s p.a.). In a year she wore out three pairs of boots - cost, probably about £4-10s³⁸. Wages in East End firms in 1908 could vary from 5s to 30s if the workers were doing piece work but 12s or 15s was the norm in a good week (£31- 4s to £39 pa). For outworkers, payments of 1s or 2s for making a whole costume were not uncommon. The interviewers were told that the average dressmaking wage had fallen from 18s in 1906 to 16s in 1908, though they found instances of women paid between 18s and 22s and one cutter/fitter in a '*very good private dressmaking house*' who earned an amazing £4 a week. But on average, wages were actually lower than they had been fifty years earlier³⁹. Miss Bell's salary in Leith in 1834 had worked out at around 24s a week.

Many garment workers were paid much less. In 1907 Cadbury and Shann published Sweating, an analysis of the information gathered by the organisers of the 1906 Daily News exhibition. Dressmakers may have considered themselves badly paid, but rates for seamstresses were unbelievably low. Seamstresses were paid 2s a dozen for corset making, 4d each for dressing gowns, 2s a dozen for chemises, combinations and night dresses, 1s-1d a dozen for blouses and 4s-6d a dozen for skirts. Weekly earnings averaged 6s to 10s for which women were working up to 14 hours a day. Many also had to pay for their own needles and thread. There is no shortage of evidence about the hardships caused by sweating in the clothing trade.

Profitability

It is seldom possible to arrive at an accurate analysis of the profit dressmakers made. All had some overheads to find, if only the rental of their premises and the costs of heating and lighting, but information about these costs is rarely available and therefore could not be included in the following calculations. The outgoings, and the potential for profit, varied enormously according to the class of business, its immediate location, turnover and the number of employees. Consequently, this section will consider dressmaking firms by type and review surviving records in an attempt to gauge their profitability. Unfortunately those firms which have left the fullest records tend to be ones that went bankrupt and left their books in the hands of the receiver or in the courts.

³⁸ Op cit, Meyer and Black (1909) p.68

³⁹ Ibid, chapter IV

High class firms

Magdalene Dunbar in Edinburgh provides a perfect test case⁴⁰. Her problems were largely due to her inability to persuade her clients to pay her. Her debts totalled an astronomical £2,549-2s-6 3/4d in 1816. There were two lists of debts. She was owed £281-17s-1d by 78 clients and a further £91-8s-3d was classed as '*bad or doubtful*' debts from 29 clients who presumably had owed them for a long time or could not be traced. Some clients owed quite large sums. Mrs McKenzie of Renton Hall owed £13-18s-3d, Mrs B Home of York Place owed £12-1s-11d, Mrs Kerr of Leith £27-11s-11d, Mrs Graham of Annfield £22-12s-3, Miss Stewart of Jamaica Place £30-10s-0d. Some of her creditors were titled ladies - like Lady Jane Stewart Greenhill, Lady Helen Hall and Lady Cathcart. Ms Dunbar in turn owed money to her suppliers, to her assistant Mary Livingstone (£20 of unpaid salary) and even to her bakers. The trustees took steps to gather her debts and kept her and her assistant at work completing orders - '*---and, so far as she has gone, a much greater sum has been earned by her and her young people than has been expended in housekeeping*' reported W H Brown smugly at the first meeting after his appointment as sequestrator. He paid off what debts he could and reduced the number of her creditors to 44 - though some of them were owed large sums - £98-10s-11d to Mary Knox, milliner, £45 to the Edinburgh haberdasher Alexander Campbell, £65-8s-9d to Solomon Davis, a London merchant, for example, as well as several hundred pounds to members of her family who had bailed her out. In the end her creditors were paid at 2s-8d in the pound and proceedings were concluded in April 1818.

The McCleod sisters in Edinburgh also ran a millinery business. Their day books survive for the period January 1803 to September 1805. They made and altered caps and bonnets for a wealthy clientele in Edinburgh and they also sent work to out-of-town clients as far afield as London and Fort William. They record up to five sales a day, though many days no sales at all are listed. Most of their clients seem to have been known by name - only a handful of sales related to passing trade - and there seem to have been +/-74 regular customers. By far their most frequent customer was a Miss Macquhae (another milliner, according to Elizabeth Sanderson⁴¹) with whom they had several transactions a month. In January 1805 she owed them £36-9s-3d. Some of their other customers bought in bulk - probably also for re-sale. For example on April 4th 1805, Mr[s] Allan Cameron at Fort William bought 6 straw hats at 18s, 6 white chip hats and 4 brown chip hats at 10s, 3 buff willow hats at 6s and 3 white willow hats at 5s - a total of £12-

⁴⁰ Edinburgh RO CS96/3562

⁴¹ Sanderson, Elizabeth, 'The Edinburgh Milliners 1720-1820', *Costume* 20 (1986) p.27

4s-6d. An even larger order was sent to the same address on April 14th - 15 bonnets, variously trimmed and lined, at a cost of £17-14s-6d.

The McCleods' made-up hats were expensive. On May 31st 1803 they sold a hat to Lady Glasgow for £1-8s, for instance, and on June 5th 1805 Miss Simpson bought a hat for £1-14s and paid a further 2s to have it lined. Even their alterations were dear - on May 28th 1803 Lady Balcarra paid 7s to have a hat altered, and on November 17th, 1804 they altered a *'Blue Chip'* for Miss Buchanan for 5s-6d - more than some small town milliners charged for making an entire hat. But their prices varied widely - it is impossible to arrive at an average figure. The following tables analyse their trade as shown in the day books. Column number one shows the income from sales (rounded to the nearest 10s), number two itemises the total number of transactions, and numbers three, four and five divide these transactions by type. All the columns are divided up by month⁴².

1803					
Month	Turnover	Number of transactions	Alterations	Made up	Sold
January	£3-10s	9	5	0	4
February	£19	24	13	5	6
March	£27	39	22	8	9
April	£38-10s	37	41	7	9
May	£24	68	32	11	4
June	£31	70	32	18	5
July	£20	44	21	0	0
August	£24	31	13	3	6
September	£8	21	12	3	4
October	£35-10s	31	13	11	3
November	£23-10s	32	14	3	11
December	£15-10s	32	14	4	5
1804					
January	£13	24	14	5	2
February	£29	46	21	5	12
March	£25	56	25	13	7
April	£84*	121	57	22	6
May	£57	110	43	23	24
June	£39	88	34	29	10
July	£29	65	25	19	8
August	£12	42	16	12	8
September	£22	72	19	21	18
October	£18	31	16	1	13
November	£21	36	19	6	6
December	£19	37	10	9	9

* included £29-9s worth of straw plait

⁴² Where the numbers of jobs exceed the numbers of transactions, individual clients have had several jobs done at one time; where the number of transactions exceeds the totals of columns three, four and five, details of some of them have not been entered in the daybooks, or the figures include sales of plait to other milliners. Items in the 'Sold' column were presumably ready-made, either by the sisters themselves or bought in.

1805					
January	£25	23	10	1	6
February	£10	23	11	2	7
March	£40	72	38	5	18
April	£60	100	45	17	14
May	£110	115	33	22	23
June	£59	87	21	22	24
July	23	58	14	17	11
August	£18	31	9	9	7
September	£13	38	22	5	4
(up to Oct.3rd)					

The McCleod sisters also bought and sold straw plait in large quantities, so presumably they were making up their own straw bonnet shapes. To give some idea of quantity and price, an entry at the back of the 1804 book reads *'Bought of Mary Craigie, Hope Law, Canongate Head April 11th, 50 yds plait 12s 14th, 30 yds fine plait 7s-6d, 24 yds coarse plait, 4s-93/4d'* ⁴³

It is impossible to tell from the day books what profit the Misses McCleod actually made, as they do not itemise their bills with a sum for making. There were three sisters, and their workload implies that they would not have had to employ staff - though they may have had an unpaid apprentice or two, or taken on help at busy times. However, they were operating in a fashionable part of the city and may well have paid a high rental for their premises. With only the daybook as evidence, it looks as if they should have had a prosperous establishment, but the McCleod day book is to be found amongst the Edinburgh bankruptcy records. (Plate 28)

Another up-market milliner's day book survives in Worcester. Its owner had a business in Evesham and made hats for a wealthy clientele. The daybook starts in April 1883, covers the whole of 1884 and January-November 1885 - though this latter part of the book is much less well kept than the earlier part, with many entries out of sequence. Most of this analysis, therefore, relates to 1883 and 1884. Most of her hats cost 8s or more, though turbans were usually 1s-6d and alterations often cost less than 1s. Ten shillings seems to have been the average price per transaction, so she was charging rather less than the McCleods. She made mostly hats, caps and bonnets but there are very occasional references to making other items like collars and muffs. These made up less than 0.5% of her total workload.

Our milliner's profit for the nine months of 1883 was £42-16s, for 1884 it was £30-11s-6d but for the eleven months of 1885 it went down to £20, which suggests that this was a business in decline. The profit seems to have been approximately 10% of her annual turnover - which was £340 for the nine months

⁴³ Edinburgh RO CS 96/3824-25

of 1883 and £290 for 1884 (fairly similar to the McCleods' 80 years earlier. Their turnover was £269-10s in 1803 and £378 in 1804). On top of this she presumably made some profit on materials, but there is no way of estimating what this might have been. The firm had a client base of +/- 45. A good deal of work seems to have been making hats for 'stock'- presumably to sell as ready made. The daybook costs these as if they were sold, and the figures given here reflect that assumption.

In 1883 she made 686 hats of which 390 were for stock, 15 were what she describes as 'orders' (probably for other firms) and the remainder were for named clients. In 1884 the figures were 581 hats made, of which 284 were for stock and 53 were 'orders'.

Transactions arranged by month		
	1883	1884
January	-	27
February	-	9
March	-	38
April	145	52
May	144	80
June	99	90
July	70	33
August	32	-
September	50	80
October	113	93
November	25	42
December	8	37

The work load for most of 1883 and for the heavier months of 1884 would imply that our milliner employed several staff, so her profits would have been further depleted by paying wages.

On 28th January 1884 the Countess of Yarmouth summoned her to Park Hall to order mourning bonnets. The 5th Marquis had died on the 24th. Lady Yarmouth's own three crepe trimmed hats cost £1-6s-9d, Mademoiselle's bonnet cost 15s-3d, the housekeeper, Mrs Birch, had a bonnet for 15s, Miss Hodder the kitchenmaid, had one for 7s-33/4d and the second housemaid's (Miss Dorfarsen) cost 7s-6d. Lady Margaret, the youngest of the countess's 6 daughters, had a 9s-10d hat. Miss Porter in the laundry had 7s-113/4d spent on her bonnet, while Miss Tillyer the head housemaid and the kitchenmaid (whose name is illegible) both had bonnets at 7s-33/4d, and Miss Leach in the laundry had one at 1/4d less. The two nursery maids (Miss Spearing and Miss Bawdler) and the nurse (Mrs Davis) had the cheapest bonnets at 6s-9d and 5s-11d. The whole order came to £6-3s-5½d⁴⁴. It was the only time in the period covered by the books that the Countess patronised our milliner, and no doubt she did so in 1884 only because of

⁴⁴ Hereford and Worcs RO 899:251

the need to get her household into decent mourning as quickly as possible at a time of year when travelling further afield would have been difficult. Nonetheless, the fact that she chose this milliner rather than one of the five other drapery and/or millinery firms that served Evesham in the early 1880s, suggests that it was the best firm in town.

Middle class firms

In 1894, Jeanette Davis wrote her Elements of Modern Dressmaking intended for students, apprentices and professional dressmakers. The prices she recommended apply to this section of the clientele, and had changed little in fifty years. She suggested that servants' print gowns could cost between 2s-6d and 7s but 3s-6d - 5s was the average; fashionably made washing dresses cost 7s-6d to 15s, but averaged out at 9s-6d; between 10s-6d and 17s-6d was usual for woollen dresses; washing silks fell within a similar range and evening dresses cost 15s to 30s. These figures were for labour costs only - and seem very optimistic. Three sets of records survive for firms which provided middle-of-the-range goods for a middle class clientele - wives and daughters of tradesmen, farmers, clergy and some country gentry. They relate to Miss Clarke of Guildford, 1873-83, Mrs Allinson of Whitehaven, 1870s and Elizabeth Pattinson in Ulverston, 1895-7.

Miss Clarke of Guildford was the only one of the three to work in a fashionable town and the only one to leave details of her prices. She kept her dressmaking accounts in the back of a school exercise book. The transactions are not recorded by month, but it is possible to analyse her workload year by year. She was not working on a large scale; indeed dressmaking seems to have been very much a part-time occupation for her. In 1873 she seems to have had 16 clients, 11 in 1874, 18 in 1875; in 1876 she did a little work for a Miss Young, but nobody else, there are no records for 1877 and 1878, but by 1879 she was back in business with 17 customers, none of whom, with the possible exception of a Mrs Smith, overlapped with her previous clientele. By 1880 she had 22 customers, 19 in 1881, 22 again in 1882 and a mere 13 in 1883. Each year saw new clients replace some of the old ones⁴⁵.

She made dresses, bodices, blouses, skirts, jackets, capes, cloaks, costumes and accessories and did a good deal of altering, re-making and trimming. She also washed and cleaned certain items. The following tables show her yearly income from her work and the numbers of transactions for making and repairing.

⁴⁵ Surrey RO Ref 1261

Miss Clarke of Guildford

Year	Annual income	Garments made	Garments repaired	Other
1873	£13-5-3	65	23	
1874	£6-3-11	67	33	4
1875	£13-9-10	79	38	
1876	£1-8-0	3	1	
1879 (May - Dec)	£8-10-9	36	8	
1880	£9-6-4	37	5	
1881	£5-4-3	23	7	
1882	£9-6-10 ½	31	6	
1883	£5-17-9	23	8	

We have no way of knowing what her overheads were. She did not supply fabric though she usually charged for sundries - probably at cost, bought from local suppliers as and when she required them, like the dressmaker clients of Mr Thomas in Helston. It seems unlikely that Miss Clarke was able to manage all of this work on her own, at least not during the 1873-5 phase of her business, so she may well have employed an apprentice or given some of the routine work to an outworker or shared the tasks with someone else in her household. She certainly did not earn enough from her dressmaking to employ a full time assistant. Her charges were low. Making a dress usually cost between 3s and 6s-6d, though the cotton dress she made for Miss Blanthorne on March 20th, 1874 cost a mere 2s-5d. Top of her price range was the ulster she made for Mrs Ranger in November 1881 which cost 8s. *'Trimming a dress'* usually cost 3s, while repairs seldom cost more than 1s-6d and for *'Mounting skirt into band'* for Mrs Watson in July 1875 she charged just 6d⁴⁶. Miss Clarke could not have lived on the proceeds of her dressmaking alone. Perhaps she did something else as well, or perhaps she was partly supported by a brother or father. We have no way of knowing.

Mrs Allinson established a business supplying ladies and children's underclothing, baby linen and fancy goods at 23, Lowther Street, in Whitehaven, sometime in the 1870s⁴⁷. Suppliers invoices show she was buying from a wide range of firms in Manchester, Nottingham and London. She was buying ready-made goods, some created specifically for her, as a memorandum from Humphreys, McChlery and Shoolbred shows. She also made items, employed a 'trainee', and was an agent for Marie Bayard's paper patterns. She was able to pay her trainee 8s per week (£20 a year) the same rate that a second hand would have been paid. Only one (undated) invoice for her work survives - for a bonnet costing £1-5s-6d. If this was typical, she was operating at the upper end of the market.

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Cumbria RO YDB17

Her husband, Thomas Allinson, owned property at Cleaton Moor and in 1881 paid £3-9s in income tax and inhabited house duty, implying that the household enjoyed quite a high standard of living. Odd household bills survive, showing that their monthly butcher's bill was around £2⁴⁸ and that their son's school fees at Mrs Matche's school for the Easter term of 1880 were £13-10s, and these reinforce this impression. However, there is insufficient evidence to tell us how great a contribution Hannah's business made to the family's prosperity.

We have already encountered Elizabeth Pattinson of Ulverston. Her dressmaking accounts survive for 1895 and 1897. The 1897 account is reproduced here:-

Elizabeth Pattinson's accounts

January	£5-13s-3½d loss	July	£2-8s-2½d
February	£10-8s-9½d	August	£11-10s-2½d
March	£9-1s-11½d	September	£15-10s-10d
April	£3-2s-6 ½d	October	£5-7s-3d loss
May	£13-13s-7½d	November	£13-14s-1d
June	£15-15s-10d	December	£14-16s-7½d

It is taken from the pencilled accounts she kept on the back of her calendar and it is impossible to analyse it in any way⁴⁹. We have no way of knowing how many transactions the figures represent, or how much of her profit came from the ready-made goods we know she sold⁵⁰. She conducted her business in a separate property so she must have paid rent and fuel bills. Mrs Fenton's letters make no mention of employees, but it is possible that Mrs Pattinson did have an apprentice or an assistant - most months there seem to have been regular payments labelled 'N' and 'F' which might be payments to staff. If the account includes all her expenses she was actually doing quite well - her total profit for 1897 seems to have been £99-3s.

Cheap firms

Firms existed to cater for all social strata. Cheap firms did not only supply goods to the poor - they also sold everyday garments to respectable families. This section deals with the records of five such firms. These businesses were working to a very low profit margin, for customers who could not always pay their bills, and, not surprisingly, many of them failed. Three of this sample went bankrupt. But such bankruptcies

⁴⁸ For December 4th 1879 to February 4th 1880 it was £2-6s-7d; for April 17th to May 25th 1880, £1-19s-1d.

⁴⁹ Cumbria RO BDB 38

⁵⁰ See Chapter two, pp. 92 and 98

were common in the 19th century. Stuart Nenadic calculated that between 1861 and 1891 55% of male-owned businesses and 59% of female-owned ones in Victorian Edinburgh went into receivership within three years⁵¹.

William Barwick ran a millinery business in York. His daybook for 1823-5 survives in York Record Office. It has very few entries, is disordered and quite difficult to read. His charges covered a wide range - from 3s (for a new black bonnet for Mrs Sarah Benson on October 1st 1823) through 9s-11d (for a black bonnet with trimming for Mrs Sowerby, three days later) to £1-11s-0d (for a 'New Leghorn Bonnet' for Mrs Smith on November 8th). He sold frills (at 1s-6d and 2s-6d) and stays (usually 10s-6d a pair), cleaned and altered bonnets and cleaned feathers (2s or 2s-6d). 1824 is the only year for which full figures are available and his turnover for that year seems to have been £30-8s-2d from about seventy transactions. This figure makes no allowance for the cost of materials as these are not listed separately, nor for any other overheads. In fact his profit in 1824 is unlikely to have exceeded £15-20. Such a work load could have been handled by one competent milliner - perhaps Mr Barwick's wife or daughter. He could not have afforded the wages of a trained milliner on that sort of profit margin. Indeed, he could not afford to live on his profit, and William Barwick was committed to the Debtor's prison in York in 1826⁵².

Binningtons of York made both dresses and headgear. A daybook survives for May 18th 1827 to September 1828, but though it is inscribed '*James Binnington*' the only Binnington to appear in the York directory of 1823 (the nearest in date to this daybook) is Mrs C Binnington, milliner and dressmaker of Bootham Row. The Binnington prices were very similar to Barwick's, but the records are even poorer - faded and illegible with much crossing out. The firm also sold fabrics and accessories and did cleaning and repair work. They were working on a much larger scale than Barwick, with almost ten times the workload. This record has been analysed on a monthly basis by numbers of transactions alone because the book is so difficult to read that it cannot be analysed by type of transaction.

Binnington's			
1827		1828	
May	37	January	43
June	80	February	29
July	82	March	78
August	57	April	63
September	47	May	131
October	46	June	98

⁵¹ Nenadic, Stuart, 'The Small Family Firm in Victorian Britain', *Business History* Vol 35 (1993) No 4

⁵² N.Yorks RO Acc 203 [F section] Barwick

Binnington's (cont)			
1827		1828	
November	47	July	86
December	33	August	55
		September	4

Working on an average profit of 5s per transaction this implies an annual profit of around £160. It should have been possible for them to have paid their staff - the workload would suggest that they needed at least a first hand, a second hand, an improver and an apprentice or two. Assuming they were paying low wages, their first hand would have cost them +/-£50 pa and the second hand +/-£20 pa. The improver and the apprentices would probably have been unpaid. If Mrs Binnington worked herself they might even have managed with fewer staff. With a total wage bill of +/-£70 a year the firm should have run at a profit. It may be that the firm failed because Binningtons seldom supplied the fabric for the garments they made thus reducing their profits. James Binnington also found himself in the Debtor's Prison in York⁵³. It is possible that he was there because the law considered him to be responsible for debts incurred by his wife's business activities - an interesting inversion of our expectations.

In February 1847 George Nicholson's bankruptcy came before the Debtor's Court in York. His account books were surrendered, and one of them, labelled '*Mary Kemp Book*' survives. Mary Kemp was a dressmaker who, presumably, worked for Mr Nicholson. The book is arranged by client rather than in date order and covers the period 1844-6. 117 names are listed for 1844 of which +/- 20 appear to be duplicates, giving a client base of +/-97. Lady French is mentioned, as is '*Mrs Labron's servant*', and some out of town addresses appear - Ellerstone, Buythorpe, Sutton - but for the most part it is impossible to trace who patronised George Nicholson's shop. There are some changes over the three years as new clients replaced old ones, but the number remained +/-100. Nicholson's was a very cheap firm. Dresses cost 3s to 5s, spencers 2s, bonnets usually 3s-6d, cloaks 5s and caps 1s to 4s. The firm did washing (1s-6d for a dress), embroidery ('*Scalop-work*' cost 1s-3d for an unspecified length) and made bustles, sleeves, berthas, habit shirts and collars, and did a large number of repairs and alterations.

The profit totals exclude the cost of materials but include some estimates where making costs are left blank or are illegible.

⁵³ Ibid, [F section] Binnington

Dressmaking	Alterations/ repairs	Cloaks etc.	Nicholson's		
			1844	Other	Profit
			Caps and bonnets		
118	27	46	42	19	£40-3s
			1845		
173	37	48	42	20	£52-9s
			1846		
150	29	42	38	30	£46-16s

It is not always clear from the bills, but it appears that, like Binnington's, Nicholson's usually made up dresses using fabric supplied by their clients. Of the 200 or so items made in 1844, for example, only 13 used materials supplied by the firm⁵⁴. This is almost certainly the reason the firm went bankrupt. There was little profit on the linings and sundries they did supply; the work load would suggest at least two employees - perhaps more at busy times - but the profits would barely cover their wages, given that an experienced dressmaker would expect at least £20 pa and an assistant at least £10 pa even if, as would seem likely, they were being paid rock bottom wages. Binningtons would have been left with a mere £10 to £22.

Elizabeth Edwards was a milliner in Welshpool. Her 1859 day book survives in the National Library of Wales⁵⁵. Her prices were extremely low - 8d for 3 '*shapes*', 6d for altering a bonnet and supplying net for Mrs Jones, shoemaker, in October, 3s-6d for a new bonnet for Emma Davies at the Vicarage and a further 4s-10d for '*ribbond*' and trimmings in November, and 1s for dying and enlarging a hat for Miss Sarah Hughes in the same month. Her prices ranged between 2s and 12s. Many weeks she records only two or three transactions, but in April and May business looked up. On May 19th she had a record 7 customers and on two other days that month she had four. Her profit from making hats was approximately £35 pa - it is impossible to be more accurate as parts of this book are illegible. However, she could easily have managed all the work by herself or with the aid of an apprentice, and if she kept her overheads to a minimum by working from home, she was, in fact, making a reasonable living (about 15s a week).

⁵⁴ Ibid [F section] Nicholson

⁵⁵ National Library of Wales, [Ref - JR Hughes mss and papers 127]

The daybook of an unknown Rotherham dressmaker survives for the 1890s⁵⁶. She charged 1s-9d for a cheap frock, 9s-6d for a top-of-the-range dress, 8s-6d for a costume, 5s for a cloak, 3s for a blouse and +/-3s for alterations. She is not always specific about what she actually charged for the job, and sometimes she seems to have sold the makings of a garment rather than the made-up article. It is impossible to work out how much she made per annum except by doing a rough multiplication of the **numbers** of items she made each year by the average price for those jobs she did cost. She executed about 100 transactions each year and thus made an estimated profit of £27 pa. There are several lots of handwriting in her day book, and at the beginning of the book she records the arrivals of Miss Epworth, Miss Rees and Miss Clegg. Perhaps they were apprentices. Her profit margin would not seem to allow for paying trained staff.

It is possible to identify some of her clients from contemporary Rotherham directories. Mrs Pashley was probably the wife of George Pashley, draper, but she might have been married to Robert Pashley, solicitor. Where a surname appears only once in the directory it is easier to be sure. Mrs Tradewell was almost certainly the wife of Thomas Tradewell, 'foreman' in Effingham Street. Mrs Cresswell must have been the butcher's wife from the Shambles, and Mrs Galbraith (with an 'e') was married to the bookseller. Mrs Seiles was presumably the brickmaker's spouse, Mrs Cowlshaw had married Fred Cowlshaw, brewer, and Mrs Russum was the wife of Edward Russum, brushmaker, of 29, Bridgegate. Common names present more problems. Mrs Fox and her daughters were amongst the dressmaker's best customers, but there are lots of Foxes in the directory, so we cannot pick them out. Nor can we identify the dressmaker herself - there were 28 dressmakers listed in the 1887 Rotherham Directory - and 3 more in Masbrough. They served a population of 42,050 (1891) in the town itself with more in the outlying villages. Our dressmaker had clients in Treeton and Thrybergh, and Mrs Houfe, wife of a farmer in Laughton-en-le-Morthen also patronised her. She seems, therefore, to have worked mainly for small tradesmen's wives and daughters. There are numerous mother and daughter groups - Mrs Seiles and daughters, Mrs Winter and Margretta, Mrs Henderson, Miss Polly, Miss Gertie, Miss Jessie and Miss Daisy, Mrs Cooper, Miss Blanche, Miss May and Miss Daisy, Mrs and Miss Mason, Mrs Fox and Miss Mabel. It was a large client base. The day book does not divide them by year, but over the six years it covers, our dressmaker was patronised by 102 families. She made almost anything they needed from a heliotrope bodice (1s), to bridesmaid's dresses, or a cycling skirt (3s) for Miss Mabel Fox.

⁵⁶ Rotherham Local Studies Library, 182/Z/13/1

Small drapers

Many small drapers did tailoring and/or dressmaking and millinery. Often garment making formed a very small part of such firm's overall business. Sometimes, no doubt, the draper's wife or daughter made a little pin money by 'obliging' special customers; sometimes it was worth the firm's while to pay a local woman to do the work to retain the client's goodwill. Dorothy Davis in Janes, Drapers of Egham (1991) implies that the dressmaking department there was run by William Janes' daughters in the 1850s.

The customer account book of a small country draper who did small scale dressmaking on an occasional basis is to be found in Leicester Record Office⁵⁷. The firm was almost certainly that of William Hackett of Barlestone near Market Bosworth (two bills to 'Mr Hackett' are interleaved in the book), and the accounts cover the period 1833 to 1848. He appears in contemporary directories as '*grocer, draper and tailor*', and the accounts include payments for drapery, tailoring, millinery - especially cap making - and dressmaking, with very occasional references to groceries which presumably have been entered by mistake in the drapery book. The accounts are laid out by customer name, but as each page was filled, that customer's account moved to a page further on in the book. Unfortunately, different client's pages filled at different rates, so the book becomes extremely jumbled and difficult to follow.

Prices and the volume of work seem to have remained pretty constant throughout the period so I have analysed the accounts for just one year - 1834. The firm's turnover in 1834 for drapery and garment making was approximately £340. Of that £15-10s-6d was the profit from tailoring and £3-1s-4d was the profit from millinery and dressmaking. A further 11s was earned from quilting two bedspreads. While these figures represent the profit from making, it is impossible to calculate the profit on drapery sales. However, it is clear that dressmaking accounted for a very small percentage of the firm's takings. Even tailoring, which was one of Mr Hackett's stated trades, was much less important than drapery as a source of income. In neither case was the firm charging high prices. Men's coats cost around 7s to make, women's gowns 2s to 4s and caps 1s to 2s. Country people could get almost everything they needed in the way of clothing from Hackett's. Between March 1833 and July 1837, for example, one of his customers, Sarah Bailey, bought two ready-made gowns (including quite an expensive print one for 9s-6d) and had eight others made. Hackett's also made her two caps and a bonnet and sold her an assortment of shifts, stays, stockings, pattens, shawls, ribbons and fabrics.

⁵⁷ Leics RO, 9D51/I/20

A similar small town business was run by B. Thomas of Helston in Cornwall. The firm's day book survives for 1847-50. Thomas's sold fabric and haberdashery and did tailoring, millinery and dressmaking, and lots of repairs. The book is untidy and difficult to read, so it has not been possible to analyse it in great detail. Many customers bought goods on credit, paying off a little at a time, so it is even difficult to be sure what his charges actually were. On September 11th 1847 Lovdy Thomas left 4s-6d unpaid on a dress. On December 27th 1848 Mrs Lane Hodge paid 13s for a plaid woollen dress, on March 31st Mrs Thomas Tremonen paid 2s-6d for having a short jacket made and on June 20th Mrs Penalen was charged the same for '*making blows*' (blouse)⁵⁸. Dressmaking was only a small part of the business for both Thomas's and Hackett's, and it is unlikely that in either case it made much difference to their overall profits.

J and D Mitchell in Dysart were a small town drapery firm doing a little millinery. Their day book for 1873-6 survives. On August 3rd 1875 Mrs James Coventry had a bonnet trimmed by them with a feather that cost 1s-2d, making the total cost of her bonnet 12s-2d - just about the top end of their price range. At the bottom would be Mrs Westwater to whom they sold a hat for 8d on April 8th 1876, while Mrs Chalmer's hat for 6s-8d (including 2s-6d for trimming and making) was probably typical. This day book is also appallingly difficult to read making a full analysis impossible⁵⁹.

Cockshutt and Preston of Kendal were yet another such firm. (Plate 29) They were drapers who did millinery and dressmaking, and again their records are not good enough for proper analysis. A handful of millinery and dressmaking records survive interspersed with other things. Again, the firm seems to have been working for a rural and none-too-fashionable market. In 1868 they were charging 6s to 8s for hats, 3s-6d to 5s-6d for making dresses and 2s-6d for making an opera cloak. Most of their clients seem to have brought their own fabrics and Cockshutt's only provided lace, lining, trimmings, etc.. They, too, were patronised by dressmakers buying in very small quantities - Miss Kelly and Miss Golightly patronised them between 1868 and 1874, seldom buying as much as 5s worth of goods. We know from clients' letters that they employed a dressmaker, Miss Lister. She probably worked alone or with an apprentice, and her work can only just have covered her wages⁶⁰.

⁵⁸ University of Glasgow Business Records Centre HF24/1

⁵⁹ Ibid, CS 245/1434/5

⁶⁰ Ibid, DB 96/10

The aptly named Ellen Cutmore was a draper at Ware in Hertfordshire in the 1870s. She too did a small amount of dressmaking. Only a handful of entries in her day book refer to dressmaking and again her charges were very reasonable - 9d for making a tippet, 2s-9d for making a polonaise, 3s for making a skirt, 3s-8d for a bonnet⁶¹. This work made up less than 1% of her trade. She may have done the work herself, or employed a family member, or farmed work out, as ordered, to an outworker.

E.J. Clarke of Bourn in Cambridgeshire kept day books but they seldom give prices. His work was approximately half repairs and half making. Dying a skirt for Miss Roper cost 3s, on 30th January 1889; repairing Miss Briscoe's jacket and '*working the holes*' cost 8d, on December 7th, 1889. The Briscoes were frequent customers and had a large staff - there are references to their footmen patronising Clarke's. Mr Clarke employed two young women, but whether they worked in the shop or did dressmaking, or both, we cannot tell. He paid a Miss Custance 5s-6d a week and Miss Pepper 8s (£14-6s and £20 pa)⁶². For such firms, the fact that dressmaking was available on the premises probably encouraged clients to buy fabric from them, thus justifying the existence of a dressmaking workroom that barely paid its way. The fact that small drapers could charge such low prices, however, affected the prices that could be charged by individual dressmakers working for similar clienteles.

At the bottom of the heap

At the bottom of the scale, socially if not financially, were women like Harriet Smith who featured in the Weekly Hampshire Independent on 18th November 1874. She let rooms to prostitutes and '*made the women fine clothes*' and one of them, Elizabeth Baker, stole a dress from her. It was valued at 7s⁶³.

An interview with a '*cheap dressmaker*' was reported in the Liverpool Review on September 17th 1887⁶⁴

The un-named interviewee described what she was paid for different types of dresses.

'That depends on the style of it. If it were a plain servant's dress, I would get three shillings. If there was much drapery about it, seven shillings and if it was a very stylish sort of dress ten shillings'.

⁶¹ Herts RO, Acc 2703

⁶² Cambs RO, R82/102

⁶³ Walkowitz, Judith R, Prostitution in Victorian Society, (1980) pp.198-9. Elizabeth Baker was imprisoned for one month. Harriet Smith, however, was deemed to be of bad character, and so was left to redeem her dress herself from the pawn shop.

⁶⁴ Quoted in op cit, Jarvis, (1981) pp. 17-18

This dressmaker was working from her bedroom - a rented upstairs room - and she employed an apprentice and rented a sewing machine for 2s-6d a week. She admitted that most of her work was servants' dresses and that each one took about two days to make. She reckoned that, on average, she took 10s a week, so presumably she was actually living on about 5s after she had paid her rent, machine hire, and fed her apprentice.

Some dressmakers took on outworkers to help with large commissions or at busy times. Mary Ann Jackson at 9, Pares Street, Leicester seems to have been one such employee. She was the wife of John Jackson, a foreman, and the couple had one adult daughter, Ada, who, in 1883, wrote a diary. Ada worked as a cap maker in a local factory. They were a prosperous working class family and John Jackson owned two houses in Chestnut Street which he rented out. The family had a piano - a great symbol of working class success - and in 1883 they actually bought a washing machine. Mary Ann had no need to work, but it would seem she did occasional jobs for Mrs Twigger, a local dressmaker, who also seems to have been a family friend. According to Wright's 1882 Leicestershire directory she was Mrs Dora Twigger of Havelock Street. We do not know what Mrs Jackson was paid, and fortunately she was only earning pin money, for Mrs Twigger was a poor payer *'Mrs Twigger sent the money for that cape last night, it has been done about twelve months - "Better late than never" I should think that is her motto'* wrote Ada on April 26th. Nonetheless, Ada herself continued to have clothes made by her⁶⁵.

Some cheap dressmakers did not work from home but moved from household to household making and mending. Eliza Spurrett in Leicester employed a Miss Goddard and a Miss Clayton in that capacity in the 1830s and paid them two or three shillings and their keep for a few days work several times a year. In Hanley in the 1870s and 80s the Hammersley family employed a Mrs Turnock on the same sort of basis. She came twice a year. Each time she made a new dress apiece for Mrs Hammersley and her two daughters, Anne and Esther. She also refurbished old dresses for them and mended garments and bed linen. In return she got her 'meat', some cast off clothing, and a shilling or two⁶⁶.

Conclusion

Prices, profits and wages in dressmaking varied enormously according to the type of establishment, but not so much according to its location within the country. In 1894 Jeanette Davis explained:-

⁶⁵ Op cit Blow (1993) p.45

⁶⁶ Information from Barbara Fishburn, Anne Hammersley's granddaughter

*'It is unfortunate for the average dressmaker that there is no fixed standard of price for making in the trade --- The price varies with the neighbourhood, the social position of the customers and the necessities of the worker, a reputation for style and fit being no inconsiderable factor in the matter of the charges made by a well-established dressmaker, whilst a good worker with her connection yet to make may have to work for very much lower pay'*⁶⁷.

'Scissors's' little booklet, Why Dressmaking does not pay, (privately published in 1895) gave various reasons why dressmaker's profits overall were so low. It was addressed to small dressmakers, not

'first hands in large departments' or those 'who clothe the wealthier classes --- whose opportunities of making profit are frequent, and to whom twenty, fifty or one hundred guineas, more or less, is a matter of no moment'.

Some of the reasons were obvious - there was no trade organisation '*Beyond an obscure institution at the West End of London ---*' or protective trade union to look after dressmaker's interests⁶⁸. Fashion changed frequently, so, unlike tailors, dressmakers were constantly having to learn new skills. Dressmakers did not survive long in the trade because '*Ten years of such high pressure work --- will break down the health of the strongest woman*' - this probably explains in part why there was such a rapid turnover of businesses. There were '*losing months*' - January, February, August, September and sometimes October - when firms could make little or no profit. These can be identified in most of the day books analysed in this chapter.

But some of the reasons 'Scissors' gives are more illuminating. For example, the point that it was necessary for firms to have their premises in good neighbourhoods is obvious enough. The fact that rateable values of property were high in such areas is also obvious, but the fact that, while shops were rated as business premises, many dressmaker's establishments were rated as private houses, **at higher rates than businesses paid**, is much less obvious to a generation that expects the reverse to be the case. It is also quite surprising to learn that dressmakers did not keep proper books and so there were often disputes with the customers, or that many workers were incompetent. Many firms simply did not train their apprentices properly, deliberately keeping them from learning certain skills so that they would have to remain 'improvers'. It is interesting that in the 1890s 'Scissors' believed private dressmakers were being ruined by competition from department store workrooms.

⁶⁷ Davis, Jeanette, The Elements of Modern Dressmaking (1894) p.189

⁶⁸ Op cit, 'Scissors', (1895), p.5. She seems to have meant the then almost moribund Dressmaker's Benevolent Association (See chapter one, p. 39).

Her book also gives us useful information about dressmakers' profits. We are told there were no dressmakers' wholesalers - materials had to be bought from ordinary mercers who allowed only 10-15% off shop prices, with perhaps an additional 2½% reduction for cash. Dressmakers did not need large quantities of fabric so they often could not buy in the wholesale markets, though some wholesalers (according to a meeting of the Southport Draper's Association on March 21st 1895) dealt '*quite properly with dressmakers, allowing them semi-wholesale prices on dress lengths*'⁶⁹. In fact, those figures suggest that dressmaker's profits were higher than one might have supposed, rather than lower, allowing them at least a few pence profit per yard on fabrics they purchased for their clients - hence the problems firms experienced when too many customers supplied their own fabric. In 1879 Gadsden and Wall's Special Order Association advertised a catalogue of dress lengths and goods at reduced rates and promised that goods would be procured and forwarded to dressmakers by return of post⁷⁰. 'Scissors' estimated the yearly turnover for an average dressmaking business to be £1,730 of which the net profit could not be any larger than £340 out of which the wage for a head dressmaker would be £80 - £120. Most of the businesses whose records we have examined made considerably less.

Most of the firms discussed in this chapter have been relatively small. At the beginning of the 19th century, dressmaking businesses run by one or two individuals, with the help of an apprentice or an assistant or two, far outnumbered larger concerns. In the second half of the century the position began to change, as we shall see in the next chapter.

⁶⁹ Op cit, Scissors, (1895) p.11

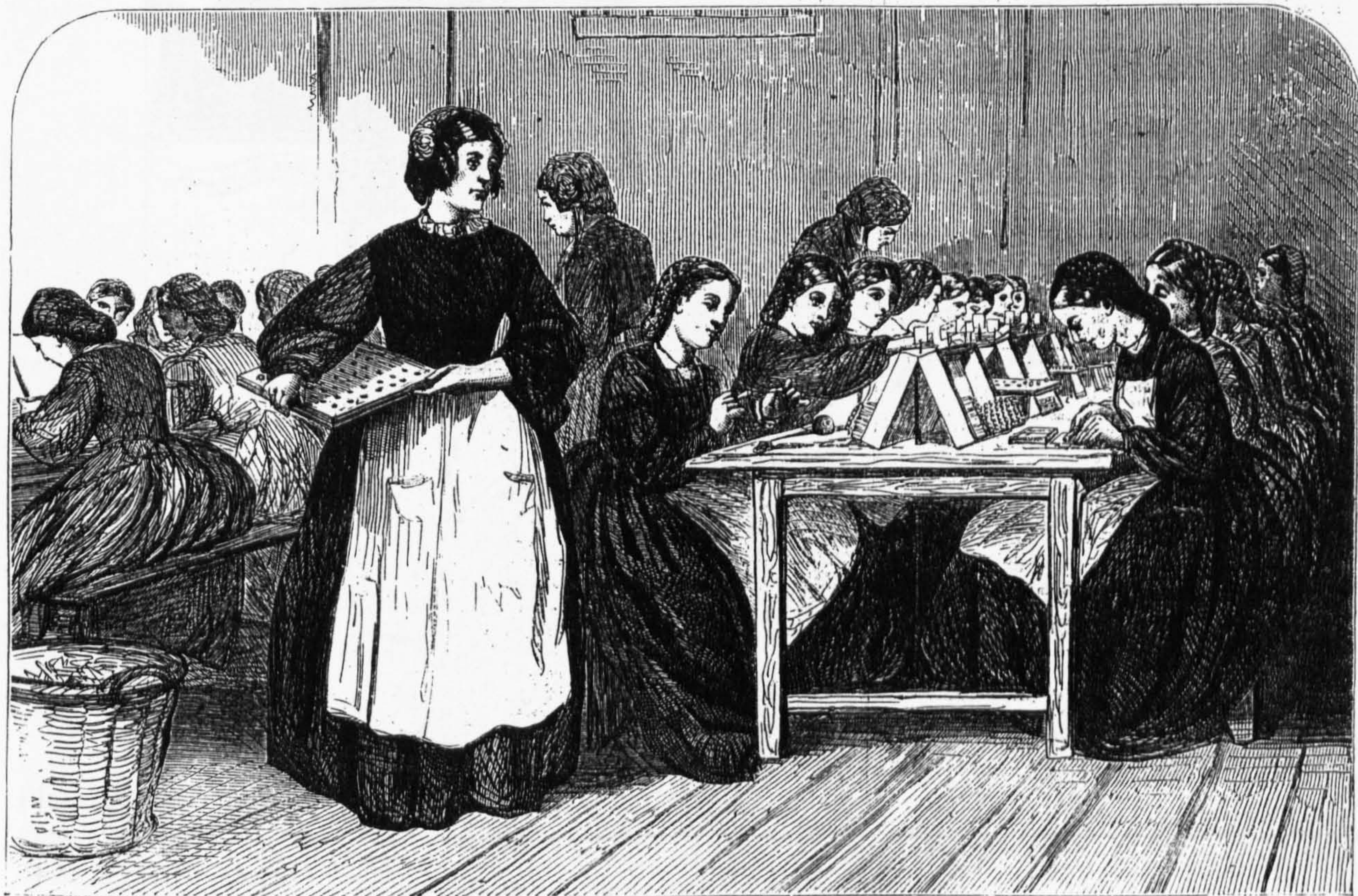
⁷⁰ They advertised in The Milliners', Dressmakers' and Warehouseman's Gazette, August 1879

are excellent, and the vegetables are grown on the spot. The cultivation of the ground and the expenses of the cooking establishment are all paid out of the 8d. per head. The buildings in the winter are heated by means of steam-piping, and are suitably ventilated. Every attention is paid to the health and good conduct of the girls, who looked as happy as possible, but gave unmistakable signs

ment, a large room in which as many boys are similarly occupied in making up the cartridges.

Within the last few weeks an excellent girls' school in connection with this establishment has been opened, under the superintendence of a governess and teacher. Reading, writing, arithmetic, and sewing are taught, for which each girl pays 8d. per week. They are required to

There are many other interesting details in connection with the Royal Arsenal which, we trust, at a future opportunity, we may obtain permission to introduce to our readers' notice. At present we have only to record our thanks for the facilities afforded by the heads of the different departments to our artist and ourselves during our recent visits to the establishment.



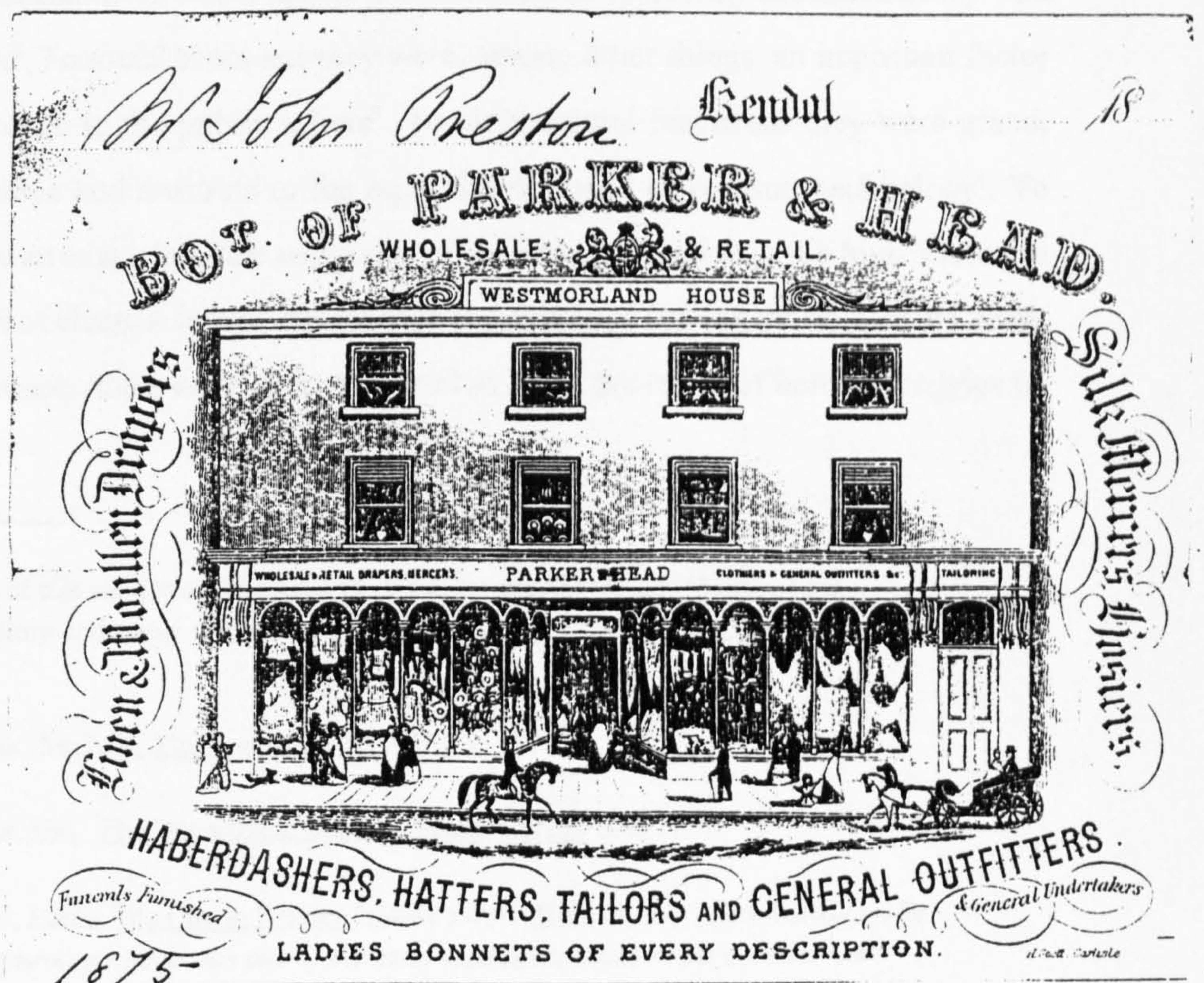
GIRLS MAKING CARTRIDGES FOR ENFIELD RIFLES AT THE ROYAL ARSENAL, WOOLWICH.

Plate 27. Illustration of women workers at the Woolwich Arsenal, from The Illustrated London News of June 21st, 1862. The woman are all wearing fashionable, full skirted dresses.



Plate 28. Bill head, dated September 13th 1828, for M. Gibbins, milliner of Market Harborough. Some firms used extremely attractive stationery and much more work needs to be done on the people who designed it. The customers in this illustration seem to be trying on their bonnets in a garden!

Plate 29 (right). Bill head for Parker and Head of Kendall, suppliers to Cockshutt and Preston of Kendall in 1875.



Chapter four

The rise of the department store workroom

'Very many articles were asked for, looked at, and then not purchased — The first article demanded over the counter was a real African monkey muff, very superior, with long, fine hair. "The ships which are bringing them have not yet arrived from the coast," answered Jones — "They are expected in the docks tomorrow."'
(The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson, by one of the firm, Anthony Trollope, (1870) p.59)

By the 1870s England was changing. The death rate fell and the population grew. More and more people lived in towns and an increasing number of them belonged - or aspired - to the middle classes. Despite the depression, there were still many opportunities for enterprising manufacturers and tradesmen. Shops expanded and some shopkeepers grew very rich.

Department stores

Department stores have been much written about as a phenomenon of the late 19th century. To some continental historians department stores stood for the debasement of taste; they were places of dreary uniformity, of temptation for members of the aspiring middle class and of moral laxity for the shops' employees¹. To Marxist historians they were places which excluded the lower echelons of society and promoted the bourgeoisie; establishments whose appeal to a mass market apparently coincided neatly with the advent of mass production². To social historians they were, among other things, an important factor in establishing a role for women in the public sphere³. To architectural historians they were grand, exuberant temples to commerce and a tribute to the rapid development of building technology⁴. To economic historians they were an example of the expansion of business enterprise in the high Victorian period, and the practical result of changes in banking practice and levels of capitalization. For the many historians of individual businesses, stores were often presented as being the result of heroic struggles by larger-than-life characters.

¹ For a fuller discussion of this see Crossick, Geoffrey and Jaumain, Serge, 'The World of the department Store: distribution, culture and social change' in Cathedrals of Consumption. The European Department Store, (1999)

² See, for example, Miller, Michael, The Bon Marche (1981)

³ For example, Lancaster, Bill, The Department Store: A Social History (1997)

⁴ For example, Mumford, Lewis The City in History (1984) p.499 'If the vitality of an institution be gauged by its architecture, the department store was one of the most vital institutions in the commercial regime'

To late 19th century novelists and playwrights, these same shops were places of wonder and temptation. Trollope's The Struggles of Brown, Jones and Robinson (see the quotation at the head of this chapter) lampooned the attempts of three young men to establish a new store, mocked both the extravagance and the dishonesty of contemporary advertising, ridiculed the credulity of shoppers and warned about the dangers of banking and business practice; while Emile Zola's Au Bonheur des Dames (1882) used a story of shoplifting to symbolise the seductiveness of a Parisian department store. Our Miss Gibbs (1909) was a musical, set in 'Garrods' showing the store as a background to love affairs'. The store was being presented as a microcosm of society with a life all of its own.

In reality, department stores were none - and all - of those things. As Claire Walsh has shown, large stores with many of the features of department stores, existed in the 18th century, so they were not, in fact, a creation of the high Victorians⁶. There is little to suggest that the goods department stores sold were dreary or of poor design. No doubt some individuals were tempted by items they could not afford, but it does not seem to have been the great social problem that gloomy moralists claimed. Shop girls' behaviour was impugned in literature and on stage⁷. In fact, most stores imposed strict paternalist discipline on their employees and in any event, most preferred to employ young men. Mass production preceded mass sales by some decades as Walsh makes clear⁸. What department stores were really about was commerce - the making of money. They expanded as they did because of the population explosion of the late 19th century, and because more people had more money than ever before.

Middle class Victorian women were responsible for the display of their families' wealth both in their homes and in their clothes. By the 1870s, women prided themselves on their skill as thrifty and discerning shoppers. Most 'department stores' had started out as drapers, and even in their expanded form, most concentrated on the sales of clothing, shoes, millinery, fabrics, household textiles and furnishings. William Whiteley of Bayswater, '*the Universal Provider*', or Harrods, whose telegraphic address - '*EVERYTHING LONDON*' - defined what they claimed to sell, were the exception rather than the rule. As department stores were catering for a predominantly female clientele, store owners learnt, by

⁵ The lyrics were by Adrian Ross and Percy Greenbank

⁶ Walsh, Claire, 'A View from the 18th Century' in op cit, Crossick and Jaumain, (1999)

⁷ For example, in the musical Our Miss Gibbs (1909), or in Henry Arthur Jones' play The Heroic Stubbs (1906) which gives one girl the line '*What's the use of being virtuous in a store?*'

⁸ Op cit, Walsh in Crossick and Jaumain, (1999)

experience and by example, that providing an environment in which respectable ladies felt safe and comfortable was good for business. To this end many provided rest rooms and restaurants, reading rooms, exhibitions and even concerts. Regular customers received mailings about sales and seasonal offers. For the less confident shopper, a familiar department store offered other advantages. It was possible to visit the shop just to look at what was on sale, and the environment was unthreatening and relatively impersonal. The establishment of workrooms for tailoring, dressmaking, millinery, upholstery and so on, was a logical extension of stores' services. It is important to see the stores in context, but it is solely with their millinery and dressmaking activities that we are concerned here. These have so far received little or no attention from department store historians.

This is understandable. Paradoxically, most of the stores that have left sufficient records to enable us to analyse their dressmaking and millinery business in any depth were situated in small, unfashionable places⁹. The larger and better known firms advertised their dressmaking activities, but left no detailed records of them. This does not negate the value of this chapter, and it certainly does not imply that department store workrooms were of no importance, but it does mean that the available data is somewhat inadequate to prove the point.

Workrooms

Firms established their work rooms at different dates. At Caley's of Windsor, for example, dressmaking was undertaken from the beginning. This firm is unusual in that the store developed out of a dressmaking business run by Miss Caley and her sister, Mrs Noble. They moved from Thames to Castle Street in 1813, and then to High Street in 1824, where they were in partnership with one John William Caley (probably a relative) as haberdashers, silk merchants and lacemen. They were '*Milliners to Her Majesty and to TRH the Princesses and Duchess of Gloucester*' by 1820, and in 1857 they supplied the dress the Princess Royal wore at her wedding banquet. This was a firm catering for the highest strata of society¹⁰. (Plates 30 a and b) Other dressmakers sold ready made goods and haberdashery, but there do not seem to be records of any other dressmaking business that burgeoned into a department store.

⁹ Even quite small firms did dressmaking. In April 1874, an advertisement in The Drapers' and Milliners' Gazette of Fashion for Mme Schild's courses of dressmaking lessons stated '*Costume making is an important part in almost all drapery establishments — as the making of dresses leads to the benefit of many other departments*'

¹⁰ John Lewis Archive, no.179

Many drapery firms did a little garment making by the middle years of the century. Often it seems that shopkeepers' wives or daughters undertook orders for special customers, or drapers paid women to execute special commissions.

A few stores established proper dressmaking workrooms in the 1850s. Many more did so between 1870 and 1900. In the early stages, these were a cause for concern. In October 1855 The Sempstress reported that

'The system of large general shops combining, under one roof and one head, the business of mercer, upholsterer, milliner, etc., is, I suppose, a remunerative one, as it is daily becoming more common --- but it has this disadvantage, it tends to remove the working class still further from the public eye --'.

However, by the 1870s perceptions had changed. As well as supplying a service to customers, the new stores were seen to provide employees with a formal training that was thought to be superior to an apprenticeship with a private dressmaker, and for which no premium was usually charged. In addition, the large stores often ran boarding houses for their work people. This enabled staff to gain experience in places far from their homes, and as travel had become much easier with the establishment of the railway network, drapery, dressmaking and millinery assistants were remarkably mobile. It has been suggested to me that there may have been some way in which jobs were advertised between stores¹¹. No evidence of this appears to survive, but no doubt informal networks - through which staff notified former friends and colleagues about promising vacancies - did develop.

In America the influence of the department store was much less benign. The stores sold ready made goods which encouraged the rise of clothing factories. Store workrooms existed only to adapt these to customers' requirements. In Philadelphia in 1860, for example, there were 308 milliners and dressmakers employing 1,138 workers. By 1870, almost 80% of these had disappeared and over 80% of the workers were unemployed, and by 1880 millinery and dressmaking was too insignificant a trade to be a category in the manufacturing census. In the same twenty year period the number of factories making women's clothing rose from 30 to 276, and the numbers they employed rose from 538 to 3,132. There was a slight revival after 1880, but the trade never really recovered¹². British department stores also sold ready-to-wear clothing and indeed, they played an important role in making such clothing acceptable to respectable

¹¹ By the archivist at John Lewis's, Mrs J Faraday

¹² Baron, Ava and Klepp, Susan 'If I didn't have my sewing machine ---' in Jenson, Joan M and Davidson, Sue (eds) A Needle, A Bobbin, A Strike --- (1979) p.49

customers. But in the short term at least, they did not have an adverse effect on the market for bespoke garments.

Many British draper's shops and department stores were taken over in the middle years of this century by two of the major chains, John Lewis's and House of Fraser. John Lewis's maintains its own archive department; the House of Fraser documents were catalogued by the University of Glasgow Business Records Centre which retains ownership of many of them. However, stores generated a great deal of paperwork, much more than small dressmaking firms, and only a tiny percentage survives. Even when we know a good deal about the structure of a firm, and we know that it made garments, we do not necessarily know very much about its dressmaking workrooms.

Luck and Sons of Darlington

Such is the case with the firm of Luck and Sons in Darlington¹³. (Plates 31 a and b) The firm was established by John Watkin who had formerly been in business at Staindrop and Richmond. In 1830 he was joined by his son, Christopher, and a partner, Richard Luck, and the firm traded as Watkins and Luck, and then as Watkins, Luck and Barron when Thomas Barron was taken into partnership. Old John Watkin was 88 in 1858 and a daguerrotype of him survives - an immensely fat, coarse-looking old man in an old fashioned frilled cravat and with a very obvious toupee. His son continued in the firm until 1870, and Thomas Barron, the junior partner retired in 1878. The firm then became Luck and Sons.

There is plenty of information about the progress of the firm and its finances. John Watkin had £3,968-12s-1d invested in the firm and Richard Luck had put up £616-13s-11d. Thomas Barron was still a salaried partner in 1842; he drew £500 a year and boarded with the 15 young men the firm then employed, in the firm's lodging house, for which he, like them, paid £26-5s-0d a year. The partners also had a bank loan of £4,097-14s-5 ½d on which they paid £204-17s-8 ½d per annum, and a private loan of £40 on which the interest was £2 pa. The rent of their shop was £100 a year. The senior staff were paid £40-£45 a year, but records do not survive for the juniors. However, we do know that staff worked long hours. A sheet entitled '*Rules for Closing, as agreed by the drapers of Darlington*' survives and dates from c.1855-7. Closing hours varied with the season, 6pm in January, 7pm in from February to April and July to November, 8pm in July and 4.30pm in December, with Monday and Saturday closing one or two hours later according to the month. The workroom staff would have kept similar hours. The firm bought from

¹³ Durham RO, Acc 134(D) Ref D/Lu

major suppliers in Glasgow, Manchester, Dewsbury and Leeds - the 1833-1848 suppliers ledger contains 259 names. The value of stock at the annual stock taking in February 1843 was £8,391-19s-10d. The year's net profit the following year - 1844 - was £500-4s-9d.

By the mid-century, therefore, Watkins, Luck and Barron was a relatively successful small-town drapery store - though it was not distinguished by the quality of its record keeping. Most of the above information actually comes from the *'Staff Ledger'* for 1841-1858 which contains a disordered mixture of data. They prospered, despite competition from numerous other drapery businesses in the town (there were 14 others in 1827, 31 in 1879. Darlington's population was 11,877 in 1841 but by 1871 it had risen to 27,730). The firm had a large client base - the 1839-43 account ledger suggests that they had +/-608 regular clients - drawn from the county as well as the town. They had clients at Appleton Whisk, Staindrop, Aycliff, Houghton, Bishop Auckland, Croft, Shildon, Sedgefield, West Auckland, Cockfield, Ingleton, Cockerton and Hurworth.

From our point of view, what is important is that they also did dressmaking. The first reference to in-house garment making comes in 1859 with two monthly cash payments of £1-16s, in April and May, to Helen Hyslop. This is early for in-house work, and does seem to have been an exceptional occurrence, perhaps to serve a particular customer's needs. The staff salary ledger for 1855-70 contains numerous women but does not refer to their occupations, so we do not know whether they were shop assistants or craftswomen. Their salaries range from Miss Teal's £16 pa in 1862 to Miss Johnson's £45 pa in 1858, but that is of little help as in other firms there was no significant difference in the salaries paid in the workroom and the salaries paid in the shop.

Lucks modernised in 1870. They moved premises, and John Windall's account survives for re-fitting the new shop, altering the counters, putting up shelves, plumbing, repairing the floor, boarding the walls, putting in mahogany pillars and fixtures, altering the stairs, putting in gas, adding window blinds, fitting new locks, providing a clock and looking glasses and improving the counting room and the staff kitchen and dining room. It was a major refit and he charged £106-7s-5d. More and more new stores were being established and Lucks needed to compete. From 1870 many firms began to introduce on site garment making. Lucks may have done so - it is not clear from the wages books.

In the *'Young Men's Book 1872-1896'* - another example of Lucks' haphazard record keeping - there are details of women's salaries and accounts of staff movements and notes about them - probably for use

when giving references. By 1872 the firm was employing at least 190 people but it is still not clear whether any of them were dressmakers. Few of them stayed long - a pattern repeated elsewhere, so this was not necessarily a comment on Lucks' status as an employer. Staff arrived in Darlington from London, Driffield, Leicester, Leeds, Saffron Walden, Barnard Castle, Newcastle, Tadcaster and Northallerton, and left for Pickering, Ripon, Bedford, Hull, Wolverhampton, Sheffield, Bradford, Rhyll, Hexham and Lincoln - a good example of just how mobile staff were. No doubt the coming of the railways made such moves easier - most of the places mentioned were on the railway network. Nonetheless, the evidence of the sheer numbers of ordinary workmen - and women - who had no qualms about travelling the length of the country to work for an employer they had never met, in a town in which they were strangers, overturns some of our preconceptions about the Victorian workforce, especially as all the women seem to have been single. The records suggest that department stores only employed unmarried women.

Few employees stayed a full year. Elizabeth Jane Stephenson remained at Lucks for nearly five years in which time her salary rose from £20 to £32, then to £10- 4s for her final quarter. Next to her name is a comment on the exceptional length of her service! Some of the life histories encapsulated in these staff notes are amazing - *'H W Underwood £35 pa fair average hand, v steady, Father murdered Mother and committed suicide'*! In 1887 Miss Jackson changed jobs and *'went into the work room'* - the first reference to work rooms at Lucks, though presumably Miss Rees, who was employed in 1886 for £50 pa and who left to go to Foster, Porter and Co and afterwards set up in business on her own account in tailoring, had worked as a tailoress or dressmaker. A forewoman in the dressmaking workrooms, Miss Page, earning £120 pa, an extremely high salary, left in June 1890.

'We gave her notice to quit on the 7th, on the 14th we found she had falsified the worker's pay bill - 30s. A very stout woman with a blinking left eye, good dressmaker, not a good manager, getting her work out very slowly, given to drink'.

One wonders what falsified reference had persuaded Lucks to take her on at such an exorbitant salary in the first place. By 1891 there was also a millinery work room. Miss Godkin worked there - *'An excellent milliner left owing to a tumour'*¹⁴.

This firm left extensive, if messy, records. There is a good deal of information about their finances, their staff, their stock, their turnover and their customers' names, but nonetheless, all we can really say about dressmaking at Luck's was that they had workrooms by the mid-1880s, that they had a considerable

¹⁴ Ibid

turnover of staff and that they paid quite well. Unsatisfactory though it is, that is more information than survives for most firms. (Plates 32 and 33)

As so few sources survive, it is necessary to move around the country to find comparative data. My examples are not chosen at random, I have examined nearly all the records I could locate.

William Turner of Stowmarket

William Turner of Stowmarket opened millinery and dressmaking departments in the 1880s and his appointment books also survive¹⁵. The first milliner to appear in them was Miss L Bellingham, employed as assistant milliner (there is no reference to a head milliner at this point) at £15 pa. She came from Mr Fowler's in Tottenham who said she '*-- left through dullness of trade, fair hand, honest, steady, willing and obliging, promises with a little more experience to make a very good milliner and certainly worth a trial*'. Mr Turner agreed, and when she left, on June 14th 1886 to go to Mr Blyth of Woodbridge he reported that she '*- lived with me some 16 months, fair milliner, all one can desire as to character, respectably connected, left me through misunderstanding with first hand ---*' Her successor was M A P Pearson from Ranchard and Co of Louth '*a very pleasing little milliner with good taste and nice pleasing manners*'. Again, Turner agreed and gave her a similar reference when she left him in November to go to W Ellis of Ely.

His first appointment of a dressmaker came on April 5th 1886. She was Isabel Osborne, second dressmaker (again there is no mention of appointing a first hand) paid £20 pa, and she came from S Osbourn of Chelmsford with whom she had worked for 12 years '*leaving only to better herself --- personal appearance and manners quite suited to business*'. Other dressmaking staff - all with salaries of £20-25 pa came from Lewisham, Kingstone and Burgate. Miss Thirkettle epitomised what an employee should be '*obliging, industrious, thoroughly honest, truthful, trustworthy, often left in charge of workroom --- neat and correct, enjoys good health*'. A first hand dressmaker was appointed in 1887 at £80 pa. She came from Dudley and before that from St Ives and went a year later to a firm in Ipswich. On the whole, Turner was lucky in his employees - the worst he said about any of his millinery or dressmaking staff was that they were '*too inexperienced*' or '*not very rapid*'.

¹⁵ Suffolk RO HC 425:1533 Box 2

W E White of Ipswich

Not far away, in Ipswich, W E White also kept appointment books¹⁶. White's began dressmaking in the mid 1870s. They paid rather better than Turner's but made much less satisfactory appointments. Miss Young, with them as milliner from November 1874 to October 1875 at £10 pa, was '*a very poor milliner - no talent, no taste*', while Miss Reynolds who took her place at £35 a year from February 1875 to February 1876 was '*a pretty conceited little fool and not over fond of work*'. Miss Ramsey was '*A very good girl and a fairly good milliner*' - which rather leads one to wonder about her relationship with Mr White. Miss Corrin, his milliner from April to September 1882 at £20, was '*a quiet respectable girl, rather deaf, pitted with smallpox*' - but there was no comment on her skills. Miss Gibson, another milliner, at White's from February 1882 to March 1883 had '*mediocre talent as a milliner, rather vulgar in manner*'. Miss Dyson who got £40 pa in 1898 was '*No good, short, not very pleasant in manner*' and Miss Simmonds to whom he paid £36 pa in 1883 had '*No great ability, rather slow -- had been accustomed to a quiet trade*' while her successor, Miss Eagle from Brighton was paid £40 a year for being '*slow, no style, peculiar looking*'.

His dressmakers were no better. Miss Priddell who was with him for three months in 1885 was '*dismissed summarily for refusing to execute an order for a customer. Short, short-tempered, rather bumptious and self assertive, moderate ability*'. Miss Vaughan, who we have already met, was one of his worst appointments - a '*good dressmaker, bad tempered, disagreeable, bad health, vindictive and generally speaking a damned nuisance to everybody*'. Miss Harper was '*a fairly good dressmaker. Conceited. Could do well if she liked*'. Miss Holdraw was '*rather antient [sic], slow, no style, dowdy looking, industrious and steady*', while Miss Mitchell, as first hand in 1896, was paid £70 but was '*Very deaf, short, overbearing to hands in workroom and not a first rate dressmaker*'. Mr White had scoured the country to find these unsatisfactory individuals - they came to him from places as far away as London, Birmingham, Worthing, Nottingham, Ventnor, Folkestone and Reigate. Of course, not all his references were so derogatory, but one is left with the feeling that a spell at White's in Ipswich was the death knell to many a career.

Advertising

The records of another store give us some idea of how such firms found their staff. Norman and Shepherd

¹⁶ Suffolk RO [White's of Ipswich]

in Northampton established a dressmaking department in 1872¹⁷. They placed an advertisement in November 1871 in the Daily Telegraph and in two Birmingham newspapers '*To Dressmakers - wanted, a thoroughly practical Person to open a new dressmaking department and to take the management of fitting, cutting out, etc ---*'. Later advertisements by this firm for staff appeared only in the local press - for a machinist in August 1880 and for a second hand in December 1885. As we have seen, staff travelled considerable distances and it was common practice for firms to advertise in other towns - for example, the Leicester Daily Post of 1873 contained advertisements for dressmaking staff from firms in Newarke, Horncastle, Swansea, Oakham, Oundle, Peterborough, Newcastle, and Mareham-le-Fen in Lincolnshire, where a country milliner and dressmaker advertised for a '*young woman to take over the workroom, make self generally useful and live as family*' - in other words, to be a general dogsbody.

The Norman and Shepherd records also tell us something about the hours staff worked. The firm was involved with the shorter hours debate, as were most late 19th century department stores, but came down heavily on the idea that it was possible to close before 8 pm at any time of year or on any day of the week. By 1872 they had reluctantly agreed to closing at 7 pm in winter¹⁸. The establishing of rules for opening hours seems to have been in the hands of committees of local businessmen, and there was no standardisation across the country. For example, a list of H Gee's opening hours appeared in the Leicester Journal for October 11th 1872; they opened at 8.30 am in summer and 9 in winter, but in May, the busiest month, they opened at 8. Closing time was 6 pm in January and February, 8 pm for most of the year, but, oddly, 7 in March, September and December. In-store dressmaking workrooms probably worked similar hours.

The records of these four firms tell us something about wages and hours, about staff mobility and about employers' attitudes, but they are less than informative about the work the dressmaking departments turned out. For this, we need to turn to Dodds and Co, drapers of Alnwick, in Northumberland, who left a particularly useful and detailed set of records relating to their dressmaking business¹⁹. These were found in a shop in Bondgate - now '*Hansel House*'. It would seem that this was originally '*Bondgate House*' from which the firm traded from the 1880s. They had had several previous addresses.

¹⁷ It was still going strong in 1909 but I have no record of when it closed.

¹⁸ Northants RO, 1952/32

¹⁹ Northumbria RO NRO808.1-61

Dodds of Alnwick

Alnwick is a small country town. It had a population of around 6,000 for most of the 19th century (5,927 in 1831, 6,626 in 1841, 5,822 in 1871) but it also served a wide rural area. Dodds' was established in the 18th century and the earliest surviving day book dates from 1788-9. The firm then had a client base of around 85 customers. It sold fabrics and haberdashery and some ready made goods like caps and stockings, but there is no evidence that any garments were made on the premises at that point. However they did supply the local milliner, tailor and stay-maker with fabric and sundries. (Plate 34 a and b)

The 1845-6 day book shows they continued to sell ready made garments - Mrs Appleby of Buston bought a '*Balzonie*'²⁰ dress for 16s-6d on June 16th and Lady C Barrington of Howick bought, among other things, a lilac print dress for 7s-6d the same month. Many of the batches of goods they sold were obviously dress lengths with trimmings, and just occasionally there are references to making - 3 shirts for 4s-6d for J W Carter in June 1845, 2 shirts for 2s for W Forster, Esq in April 1846, 12 shirts at 2s-3d each, plus 4s carriage, for Rowland Bell in Jamaica in December 1845, a petticoat for Lady G Grey of Howick for 1s-6d, and a muff altered for Mrs Scott Burgess for 5s in December. But there are only a dozen references to making items in the whole period covered by that day book. Perhaps the draper's wife or daughter filled orders for special customers, or perhaps they employed someone on an occasional basis.

The firm was also doing some millinery in the 1840s, as well as selling ready made caps and bonnets. The '*Shop cash book*' refers to millinery sold and mentions, for example '*June 5^h 1849 To Miss Pacey's bonnet cleaning and turning 2s.*' '*To Miss Pringle's bonnet making 3s-6d*'. May and June were the busiest times of the year and there were a mere half dozen millinery transactions a year in these months in the 1840s and 50s.

By 1864 the proprietor of the firm was Mary Dodds '*widow*' and she had four shops - numbers 36 and 37 Bondgate and numbers 1 and 15 Paikes Street. Parts of Bondgate were rebuilt in the 1890s and the street numbering changed, so we cannot be certain which shops were Mrs Dodds', but 1 and 15 Paikes Street are the shops either side of that street, fronting on to the Market Place, a hundred yards or so away. It must have been inconvenient to have staff and stock split between four buildings and by 1887 she had given up the Paikes Street properties and concentrated her activities on Bondgate House. William Dodds

²⁰ '*Balzonie*' was probably balzarine (a fine cotton/worsted muslin) or balzerine (a narrow striped grenadine with crepe stripes)

had joined his mother and the firm traded in that building as M Dodds and Son until the 1930s. It was quite small - not what we, today, think of as a department store. Nonetheless, there were many similar small-town draper's shops which operated on department store principles and which had workrooms for garment making²¹.

Mrs Dodds was an excellent record keeper. In the late 1860s she decided to expand the dressmaking side of her firm's business. A complete series of what are called '*Journals*' survives for the period 1865-83. These are arranged by month and client name with all transactions listed, and were probably transcribed from day books. They are neat and legible, and with totals and details clearly entered. It would appear that Dodds were still doing a very little dressmaking and millinery in 1865. Mrs Dixon of Brockdam paid a bill of £2-5s-5 ½d in March that year of which 4s was for '*making dress*' - probably from the 10 ½ yards of alpaca she paid £1-4s-6d for at the same time. There are eight other dressmaking transactions that year and rather more for making, trimming, re-trimming, altering and cleaning hats and bonnets and cleaning and re-curling feathers.

The picture was much the same in 1866 and 1867. Most transactions were purchases of fabric or haberdashery, but there were occasional references to making. For example, Mrs Brown of Littlehaughton had a bonnet re-formed for 1s and a jacket made for 3s, in October 1866; Mrs Bolam had a coat repaired and given new buttons (2s); Mrs Clarke of Forton Hall had a '*wincie*' dress made '*complete*' for £1-17s-6d. Garment making and millinery transactions made up less than 1% of the firm's transactions at this point, and the addition of some tailoring work in 1867 did not alter that balance.

In fact, tailoring was never very important to the firm. Most of the work they did took the form of minor alterations for which they charged no more than a shilling or two, and quite a lot of that was done for the local military - repairing tunics, putting new stripes down the sides of trousers and adding extra straps to breeches and pockets to '*patrol jackets*'²². They seem to have been performing a service rather than

²¹ See, for example Proctor, Molly G, Are You Being Served. Madam. Shopping at the Drapers in Bygone Kent (1987). She illustrates the frontages of many shops that were apparently no bigger than Bondgate House, and claims that all but the smallest had workrooms. Many also had live-in staff. Janes of Egham (1829-1932) was much the same size and they, too, did dressmaking and tailoring - see Davis, Dorothy, Janes. Drapers of Egham (1991) (pamphlet)

²² For example, a Mr Purves paid 3s to have new pockets put in his patrol jacket in January 1871; R Dand of Hauxley had his breeches '*strip'd*' for 7s in January 1873 and Major Brown of Dexford had new straps put on his gaiters in November 1879.

exploiting a niche in the market. On occasion they mended rugs and made blinds²³. Like many small town shopkeepers they attempted to do as their customers asked - however unusual the request. In July 1873, for example, they acted for a Mr Rennison and arranged to have three tiger skins and one leopard skin dressed for him in London! They even, like Brown, Jones and Robinson in the quotation at the head of this chapter, sold '*monkey muffs*'. Miss Thompson of Bygate Hall bought one in October 1865 for £1-1s-6d.

From 1868 the dressmaking and millinery sides of the firm's activities expanded. In January that year garment making and mending accounted for £14-8s-11d worth of the firm's trade - almost as much as in the whole of 1867 - though it was still a very small part of the total. That month alone Dodds' total turnover was £269-1s-1d. It is surprising that Dodds were able to expand in this way. Alnwick in 1864 had 14 other draper's shops, 25 dressmaking firms and 36 tailors. Unfortunately the '*Journals*' that cover February 1868 to January 1871 are missing so it is not possible to assess the rate at which the dressmaking business expanded, but by 1873 it was well established and there seems to have been a workroom - in April '*Miss Oswald, Workroom*' spent 18s-6d on a jacket. The firm seems to have done more altering and re-trimming of garments than actual making of new ones. They sold ready-made dresses and the workroom specialised in customising these and making them fit. They carried a stock of black dresses, and trimming them with mourning crepe was quite a profitable side line. Alnwick was not a fashionable place and the canny Northumbrians who lived there seem to have been anxious to get the last ounce of wear out of their garments - hence the frequent alterations and re-trimmings. Rural Northumberland was not wealthy - its inhabitants were hill farmers, fishermen and miners. Dodds served a wide area, from Morpeth in the south, to Chillingham in the north, inland as far as Branton and Whittingham and along the coast from Seahouses to Amble. They even had the occasional customer from North Shields. Some of their clients came from local big houses - Forton Hall, Espley Hall - and they numbered the Greys of Howick amongst their customers. For the most part, however, they seem to have served the wives of local farmers and tradesmen.

The following table shows the balance between making and mending women's and men's wear in 1873, the first full year for which records survive after the workrooms were established.

²³ In November 1871 they charged 2s for repairing a horse rug and in July 1873 they received 3s-10 ½d for hemming blinds from Mr Collins of Chapel Lane.

Garment making at Dodds, 1873 - numbers of transactions

	Women's wear			Men's wear		
	Making	Repairs/ alterations	Value £ - s - d	Making	Repairs/ alterations	Value £ - s - d
January 8	16		8-17-4	2	11	2-1-3
February	4	8	6-7-10	3	9	4-19-3
March	5	15	2-14-10	0	4	1-11-0
April	3	16	12-10-3	0	6	19-3
May	5	48	18-1-6	0	13	1-9-0
June	2	20	10-15-2	1	11	2-9-9
July	3	23	10-1-9	2	15	6-0-6
August	6	22	7-4-3	4	10	6-9-7
September	4	20	13-18-1	1	9	4-5-0
October 10	18		8-7-8	0	9	1-9-0
November	3	19	8-4-6	1	5	2-14-3
December	2	5	5-17-2	0	16	2-3-9
Totals	55	230	£113-0s-4d	14	118	£36-11s-7d

Millinery and dressmaking were much more profitable than tailoring. The table below shows sample profits in both sections for June and November over a series of years. Garment making still accounted for a very small percentage of the firm's turnover.

Sample profits in millinery and dressmaking and tailoring:

	Total turnover (estimated)	Women's garments	Men's garments
June 1871	£614	£14-17s - 3d	£3 - 6s- 8d
November	£422	£ 6-14s-10d	£1-10s- 0d
June 1875	£628	£ 8 - 6s - 2d	£1-12s- 6d
November	£607	£ 5 - 2s - 3d	8s-10d
June 1879	£435	£ 9 -11s -1d	£7-10s 4d
November	£492	£13 - 8s -4d	£5 - 4s - 3d
June 1882	£604	£14 - 8s-3d	£11-2s - 9d
November*	£228	£ 5 -15s	Nil

* Complete records do not survive for 1883 so it was not possible to keep to the system of four-yearly samples.

By 1876 Dodds' dressmaking department kept separate records, and their dressmaking business can be carefully analysed from that point until 1884.

1876						
Month	Income	Dresses	Skirts	Jacket/bodice	Alterations	Other
January		28	1	2	5	1
February		11	5	2	3	5
March		24	1	1	6	6
April		13	5	8	7	8
May	Total for year	22	4	13	6	15
June		35	2	9	3	13
July	£162-6-9	26	5	3	10	14
August		26	2	2	10	15
September		19	1	3	11	8
October		25	2	10	8	6

1876 (cont)					
November	19	1	3	12	6
December	33	3	3	10	6

'Dresses' covers full outfits like costumes and 'Jackets/bodices' includes capes, cloaks and blouses.

It is unnecessary to break down each year by the range of items produced for the profits and numbers of transactions remain much the same throughout, as do the slack and busy periods. Individual transactions varied enormously in price. Making dresses ranged from 3s-6d to 18s. Unpicking a dress (for Mrs Parker of Allerburn in 1876, for example) cost 2s-6d, but unpicking and remaking a blue dress for Mrs Boland of Stamford cost 17s-6d in September 1873. Sleeves cost 1s. Alterations ranged in price from 6d to over a pound.

Dodds' prices were actually quite high - 12s for re-trimming a Dolly Varden dress for Mrs Sandford of Belvedere (February 1873) seems expensive when other firms were charging half that for making a complete garment, as does 11s-6d for adding crepe to a ready made costume (which itself cost £8-12s-6d) for Mrs Dickson of Bailiffgate (January 1873) or £4-15s-6d for re-trimming a black silk dress with new silk flounces for Mrs Avery of North Shields (May 1873).

The remaining table simply covers the number of transactions per year and the total income from dressmaking.

Year	Income			Number of transactions
	£	s	d	
1876	162	6	9	566
1877	203	18	6	501
1878	204	19	6	526
1879	196	15	6	452
1880	156	8	11	494
1881	201	11	0	428
1882	238	19	6	495
1883	207	16	6	410
1884	136	0	0	415

This averages out at +/-10 jobs a week. Dodds had a dressmaking client base of 145²⁴. One dress takes approximately 30 woman hours, though skirts and some repairs would take much less. It would therefore be reasonable to assume that Dodds had a minimum of six workroom staff. A good head dressmaker at this date was normally paid about £80 pa and a second hand £35 pa, improvers earned about £10 pa and apprentices were unpaid. This postulates a minimum wage bill of around £135 pa, so the department

²⁴ Based on a calculation for 1880

earned up to £100 a year. Dressmaking at Dodds was a relatively profitable activity - though Molly Proctor in her study of comparable small drapery businesses in Kent claimed that it was usually provided as a service rather than as a source of income²⁵.

Dodds also had a millinery workroom though by 1876 this was not as important as the dressmaking. The millinery day books survive for 1876-80. They do not seem to have started making hats and bonnets until May 1876, and though a few were made after 1880 that side of the business declined. Most items cost between 8s and 18s. Millinery is fiddly and uses a lot of materials, so it is quite difficult to calculate what the cost of making actually was, especially as quite often there is no figure allocated for 'making'. Where there is, it is usually somewhere between 1s and 3s-6d. Occasionally bonnets were quite expensive, as in the bill quoted below: It is dated November 11th, 1876 and was to a Mrs Robertson.

	£	s	d
Making mount		3	6
Foundation		1	6
½ velvet 10s		5	0
¾ net 2s		1	6
3 ¼ lace 7d		1	10 ½
2 ribbon 1s-4d	2	8	
1 ½ ribbon 10d	1	3	
¾ sarsnet 2s-6d		10 ½	
2 feathers 2s-6d	5	0	
2 ears 4 1/2d			9
1/16 net 7s			5 ¼
elastic			2
Total	<u>£1</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>3 ¼</u>

Number of millinery transactions by month and year

	1876	1877	1878	1879	1880
January	33	27	12	20	
February		13	32	11	15
March		49	29	-	33
April		34	31	9	24
May	32	67	61	60	45
June	87	93	107	65	63
July	59	61	49	56	57
August	24	10	26	57	25
September	69	26	36+	30	22
October 31	20	-	34	36	
November	54	36	73	70	33
December	30	26	21	44	27

²⁵ Op cit, Proctor, (1987), pp.24-27

The millinery day book is written in appalling handwriting - hence some of the discrepancies. The client base for millinery was similar to that for dressmaking - nearly all the names are the same. The staff seem to have made a lot of hats and bonnets for stock in the 1870s (these appear in the 1870-81 stock book) but by 1880 this practice was dying out. Millinery was not, it seems, a paying line.

No other firm has left anything like such detailed records. This is unfortunate because it means we have no way of assessing how typical Dodds was. They were a small firm - scarcely warranting the description 'department store', and Alnwick is an out-of-the-way place. Though it is clear that Dodds had competition from other local drapers and dressmakers, their prices still seem to be very high. This may well reflect the fact that they were the only firm in town providing their particular kind of service but it would be nice to know.

Other firms

More prestigious stores had their dressmaking workrooms, but we know about them only through advertising leaflets and promotional material. This provides some interesting insights, but not the wealth of detail we get from Dodds.

Lindops of Chester, for example, established a dressmaking workroom in 1884. The store was originally McLellan's, trading at 44, Eastgate Row South as a traditional drapers and silk mercers. William Edward Lindop was apprenticed there at the age of 15 in 1865 and in 1883 he took over the business. 1884 was his first full year of trading and in July that year he married Mary Elizabeth (Polly) Tinker who was a milliner at Owen Owen in Liverpool where he had been sent as part of his training. They lived in some style at Holly Bank, 5, St George's Crescent, Queen's Park and had 10 children. Presumably due to Polly's influence, Lindop's had millinery and dressmaking departments from 1884. The customer account books for 1882-1899 show that the store as a whole had 264-300 regular customers. It was a medium sized concern in a fashionable, old established town, carrying a stock valued at around £3,100 for the whole of the period, paying an annual +/-£920 to suppliers and making an annual profit of +/-£850. No separate accounts survive for the dressmaking section, but for a time at least it had a prestigious employee - Miss Pinch who had trained at Redfern's, the court dressmakers in London. In her case, the arduous training had paid off and secured her a good post. An undated flier (Plate 35) addressed simply '*Madam*' announces Miss Pinch's arrival and stresses the department's selling pitch - good fit, moderate price and

*'Mourning supplied at a day's notice'*²⁶. We do not know what Miss Pinch was paid, or how many staff she had, so it is difficult to make any comparisons with other firms, but presumably the department was successful. Dressmaking continued at Lindop's well into the 20th century. A present day descendant of the family remembers that when the building was renovated, the floor cavity beneath the workroom was full of pins, threads and fabric fluff.

Bainbridges of Newcastle was typical of many large department stores. The firm started in 1841 at 29, Market Street and occupied 3,313 square feet. By 1885, when an article about the firm appeared in the Newcastle Daily Journal, (June 23rd) the shop had taken over many of the surrounding buildings and occupied 56,566 square feet on four storeys. There were 21 workrooms employing 2-300 people and amongst them were dress, costume, mantle and bonnet making rooms. The firm also did tailoring, upholstery, pit flannel making, french polishing and carpet beating, as well as making hosiery and running a shirt and clothing factory in Leeds. They *'Designed, Fitted and Made'* garments on the premises *'DRESSMAKING - High Class and Medium as desired. Estimates Given Charges Moderate'* was offered in the catalogue of the bi-annual sale held on July 27th 1899²⁷. (Plates 36 a and b)

The most interesting description of dressmaking at Bainbridges comes in a pamphlet which, to judge by the illustrations, dates from the 1920s, so is rather too late for our period, but it is probably worth quoting because it was supposed to contrast with conditions in the 1880's:

'But far more interesting than the room was the crowd of well dressed girls and women, whose smiling, happy faces were eloquent of the pleasure they found in their work and its conditions. The picture we feared to see was not there, and we were at home at once. From table to table we went, delighted at every step with the sight of bright, saucy eyes and smiling faces. No stern discipline was visible, and as the nimble fingers quickly manipulated the many machines at work, the tongues wagged freely and merrily. The old back-breaking, leg-tiring labour has gone, and in its place the machines are worked by power from great engines far away, and the principle requirements now are a knowledge of the work to be done and an observant eye and deft fingers. The "stitch, stitch, stitch" of Tom Hood's day has gone, at any rate from factory life, and the heat and burden of the day are borne by uncomplaining engines ---'

It is significant that the workroom was being described as a 'factory' and interesting that 'Song of the Shirt' was being quoted, as if it might still be applicable, some eighty years after it was written.

²⁶ Cheshire RO, CR641

²⁷ John Lewis archive, number 265

Even if conditions had improved, they still left much to be desired. Department stores treated their employees very severely. A Draconian set of staff rules survives from Hammonds of Hull, dating from c.1889, imposing 6d fines for all sorts of minor misdemeanours like omitting articles from parcels, signing incorrect bills, not adding up the book properly or promising to send parcels out at given times and failing to do so. Similar penalties applied in the workrooms. When wages were usually well under £1 a week such penalties were swingeing²⁸. At Blakes' in Maidstone, the workroom rules were still on the wall in the 1970s.

*'No work to be done in workroom time without being entered.
All goods to be used carefully, an all materials to be faithfully accounted for. Silk cuttings
to be carefully saved from each table and utilized
Punctuality to be strictly observed, and absences from business not allowed, except by
permission of the firm
Anyone infringing these rules will meet with dismissal'*²⁹

By 1900 most large department stores had established workrooms. To judge from their annual sale leaflets, Affleck and Brown in Manchester established a dressmaking department in 1896³⁰. Their leaflets do not mention the trade until 1897 and then the only comment is *'orders executed promptly'*. The millinery department was advertising that *'all orders for Millinery will be executed at Sale Prices'* as early as 1888. They were, however, aware of the needs of the trade. In the 1889 and subsequent sales they offered *'Dressmaker's lots'* of sundries - steels, beltings, buttons, hooks and eyes, etc.. It was a way of off-loading unsold stock but it is questionable how many private dressmakers could have afforded to avail themselves of the offers. (Plate 38)

Firms varied in the way they advertised their services. Speed of execution was important as we have seen and Norman and Shepherd's selling point in 1873 was typical - *'Dressmaking orders executed with care and punctuality'*. North country firms tended to offer no-nonsense value-for-money, but some firms concentrated on high fashion and exclusivity. Heelas of Reading had a high class dressmaking department by the early 1900's, but no evidence survives as to when this was established. (Plate 37) In 1907 they advertised *'The Most Expert Fitters and Cutters in the County are at your service'* and described themselves as *'Maison Heelas, Court Dressmakers'*, though in the Summer Sale of 1909 they advertised

²⁸ University of Glasgow Business Records Centre, HF20

²⁹ Op cit, Proctor, (1987) p.23

³⁰ In the collections of the Gallery of English Costume, Platt Hall, Manchester

'In the Dressmaking Department special Reduced estimates are given during the sale'. By 1929 the department was on the first floor as was

'the Reception room for the Dressmaking and Ladies Tailoring clientele. Here visitors can always be shown the exquisite creations of the greatest designers of today, either for direct acquisition or to serve as models upon which to base their own requirements'.

By 1929 they were also holding fashion shows and provided a cutting out service for home dressmakers.

A booklet illustrates the workroom in the 1920's and describes how

*'The value of this Department is enormously enhanced by the close touch constantly maintained with the world's leading Fashion Designers. Exclusive models, representative of the best they have to offer, are secured each season.'*³¹

Wages

Department store records are a poor source of information for dressmaking prices but they are quite informative about wage levels. William Turner of Stowmarket paid his first hands £60-£90 pa, his second hands £15-£25 pa and his improvers £5-£13 pa in the 1880s and 1890s³². William White of Ipswich had difficulty getting decent staff regardless of what he paid. His second hands seem to have got £18-£40 pa, his first hands £40-£70 pa and his improvers around £10 pa³³. Lucks in Darlington paid similar wages, though one particularly disastrous head of their dressmaking department got £120 a year in 1890. At the same time they paid *'an excellent milliner'* £65 pa, Miss Thompson who was *'useful with her needle'* got 3s-6d a week (£9-2s pa), and Polly White, who they felt would *'make a good second hand'* got 12s a week (£31-4s pa).

Experienced hands could set their own wages. In 1872 Dunn and Co of Albion House in Newcastle-upon-Tyne advertised for a mantle maker *'a superior, experienced person to take charge of the workroom, send particulars and salary required, etc.'*³⁴. In 1875 Hobson and Sons of Spalding requested *'Applications stating age, salary and references'* for milliner/mantle maker³⁵

³¹ John Lewis archive, 194/A/4

³² Suffolk RO HC425

³³ Ibid [White's of Ipswich]

³⁴ Leicester Daily Post, August 5th, 1872

³⁵ Leicester Daily Post January 16th 1875

The wages books survive for the firm of James Smith and Co, Clayton Street, Newcastle, for the 1890s. The firm did both millinery and dressmaking. In 1891 they employed 8 milliners and 10 dressmakers. The head milliner was paid 21s-8d a week, the three apprentices got 3s and the others 5s-6d (2), 5s-4d, and 10s. The head dressmaker got £2-3s, her apprentices got 4s, her first hand, 9s, her second hand, 8s, and the others 5s to 6s-6d. The total annual wage bill for the two departments for 1891, therefore, was £380-11s. Unfortunately we have no evidence about their turnover. Wages varied according to the staff employed at any one time - even in 1894 one dressmaker's apprentice was earning a mere 2s-6d a week.

Conclusion

Overall, the coming of the department stores changed and simplified shopping patterns. Though we have much less information about them than we would like, the development of in-store workrooms provided buyers with a convenient new way of getting clothes made. It also created a formal, organised and respectable way of obtaining a training in dressmaking and millinery, and established a clearly defined career structure within those trades. Most in-house workrooms were purpose built and designed and stores often prided themselves on the quality of the conditions they offered their work people. There was no tradition of late night working in in-store workrooms and dressmakers' terms and conditions were similar to those of other store staff. In slack periods, workroom staff were sometimes deployed as saleswomen³⁶. Department store dressmakers also prided themselves on their 'respectability'. As Mr Hilton, manager of the mantle department at S H Hannington's in Brighton, explained to the Children's Employment Commissioners in 1864:-

'We try, and I think succeed tolerably well, to have none but well-conducted, respectable girls in our employ. Perhaps our greatest safeguard is the girls themselves, for, if any improper character were to get into the workroom, they would be sure to take means to let the foreman know and get her out again'³⁷.

In this case, the girls had a male foreman though women were still in charge of most dressmaking departments. But the owners of the stores that employed them were nearly always men - men with ambition and vision, but above all, men with money. Dressmaking was just one of many services their stores offered. It was not necessarily a particularly profitable one but it provided a way of retaining customer loyalty and of selling more fabric and trimmings. In the short term, losses in the dressmaking department could be subsidised by profits in other areas, and any calculation of the profit the department

³⁶ However, this was not always the case. According to Molly Proctor - op cit (1987) pp.23-27 - Blakes of Maidstone, for example, operated a policy of keeping their sales and workroom staff entirely separate.

³⁷ Interviewee 144

made had to take into account increased sales of fabric and sundries and increased opportunist sales to customers who visited the store for fittings. Dressmaking departments thus worked on a completely different economic basis from that of individual dressmaking firms, and this enabled them to keep their prices competitive.

However, department store workrooms did not replace bespoke dressmakers. Well into the 20th century there were still numerous dressmaking firms - ranging from one-woman businesses to large establishments employing dozens of hands - and there was a large clientele of ladies who preferred the greater degree of personal service such firms could offer. Indeed, as late as 1914, it is estimated that department store sales of clothing and footwear (both bespoke and ready made) accounted for only between 9.5% and 11% of all such sales³⁸. Different stores catered for different clienteles, but the majority of customers were middle class. Upper class customers still tended to patronise more exclusive establishments and working class women went to dressmakers working from home whose prices they could afford. Better class establishments that competed with department stores for staff began to find it necessary to improve conditions for their own workers, but working practices in many private firms remained very variable. Even in the 1920s and 30s, Helen Bagrie, Aberdeen's most prestigious costumiere, was paying her staff well below the minimum rate and demanding more of them than was expected of their department store colleagues³⁹. Nonetheless, the standards established in department store workrooms were an important factor in turning dressmaking into a 'respectable' profession.

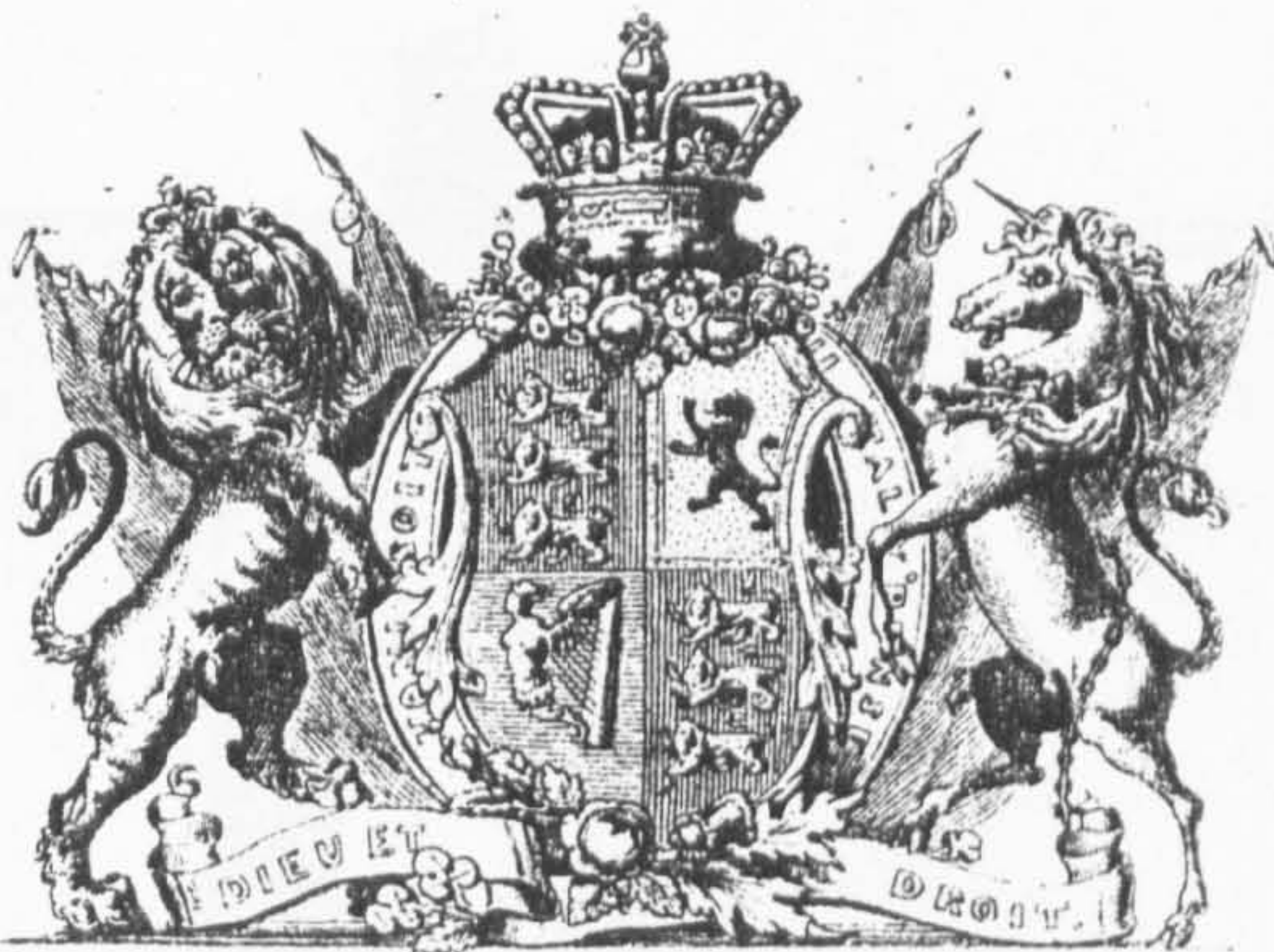
³⁸ 'The World of the Department Store: distribution, culture and social change' in op cit, Crossick and Joumain, (1999) pp.1-5

³⁹ Whyte, Anne, 'Helen Bagrie, Costumiere, 343 Union Street, Aberdeen; reminiscences of a dressmaker's workroom', *Costume* (16) 1982

Mr. Cattivall

Windsor

1846



BOY OF I. CALEY, & Son
Silk Mercer, Linen Draper, Saddler, Hosier &c.

TO THE QUEEN AND THE ROYAL FAMILY.

1	Long Cloth	1	4
1	Trunk	2	2
2	Yak Lace 20	3	4
1	Black Silk		
	Recd. from P. Caley & Son	1	1/2
	M. W. Caley		11 1/2

Plates 30 a and b

Billheads dated 1837 and 1846 for J
W. Caley, milliner of Windsor. Caley's
later became a department store.



Instant W. Caley & Son
Hat with feathers 15/6

Received August 27
for W. Caley
Windsor



Plates 31 a and b
 Luck's department store in Darlington
 c.1860 and c.1910. The shop was
 totally refitted and reorganised in
 1870.



Dressmaking Department

Our large and up-to-date
stock of

Dress Materials,
Silks, Trimmings,
Laces, etc.,

enables us to offer our
customers a most varied
choice.

SUGGESTIONS
AND ESTIMATES

given for Dresses
for all occasions.



PATTERNS OF
MATERIALS
Post free on application

Millinery

designed and made to
match every style
and shade of
Costume.



MILLINERY FOR
CHILDREN
OF EVERY AGE



SMART
SEMI-TRIMMED
MILLINERY
FOR EVERY-DAY WEAR
IN AN EVER-CHANGING
VARIETY



New Models,

showing the very
latest styles,
are constantly
being added to
our stock.





Alteration in the Dressmaking.

MADAM,

Having placed the DRESSMAKING under new Management, (MISS PINCH from Redferns), with a staff of Assistants, will now be able to execute all orders with despatch.

Fit guaranteed, terms strictly moderate.

The Stock of DRESS FABRICS bought before the advance in wool, in all the latest Novelties.

Patterns with Estimates for Costumes on application.

TAILOR-MADE COSTUMES from Two Guineas.

LACE FLOUNCING in Black, Cream, Beige, &c., in all widths. NETS, Plain and Figured.

NUNS' VEILING in all shades.

LACE CLOTHS and other Novelties for Evening wear, together with the latest Novelties in WOOL SHAWLS, LACE HANKERCHIEFS, GLOVES, FLOWERS. FRILLING, &c.

MOURNING SUPPLIED AT A DAY'S NOTICE.

W. E. LINDOP,

(Late McLellan),

EASTGATE ROW, CHESTER.

Plate 34 a. (Top left)
Bondgate House, Bondgate, Alnwick, formerly M. Dodds and Son. They took over this property in the 1880s.

Plate 34 b. (Above) Numbers 1 and 15, Paikes Street, off the Market Place, Alnwick. Prior to the acquisition of Bondgate House, these two shops, plus two more on Bondgate, belonged to Dodds.

Plate 35. (Left) Flier for Lindops' of Chester advertising the arrival of Miss Pinch as head of their dressmaking workroom, c.1907.

BAINBRIDGE & Co. Millinery & Dressmaking.



WHEN FORTUNE SMILES TAKE THE ADVANTAGE.

1Th	c 0 ^h 46 ^m A.M.
2F	Sir Robert Peel died, 1850
3S	Dog Days begin
4S	6th Sunday after Trinity
5M	Dividends due at Bank
6Tu	Old Midsummer Day
7W	Tho. à Becket. o 1 ^h 37 ^m P.M.
8Th	
9F	Fire Insurance ceases
10S	Oxford Term ends
11S	7th Sunday after Trinity
12M	Clock before Sun 5 ^m 18 ^s
13Tu	Marat assassinated, 1793
14W	Sun rises 3 ^h 48 ^m
15Th	St. Swithin
16F	o 6 ^h 47 ^m A.M.
17S	Total Eclipse of Sun, 1833

18S	8th Sunday
19M	Clock be
20Tu	Professor
21W	
22Th	Sun rises
23F	o 1 ^h
24S	
25S	9th Sunday
26M	Earthquake
27Tu	Clock be
28W	Battle
29Th	Sun rises
30F	
31S	c 5 ^h



Continental and Colonial Out

Plate 36 a and b. Part of a calendar issued to customers by Bainbridge's of Newcastle in 1868. These pages advertises their millinery and dressmaking departments and 'Summer Fashions' for June.

BAINBRIDGE & Co's Summer Fashions.



IF THE BRAIN SOW NOT CORN, IT PLANTS THISTLES.

1Tu	Lord Howe's victory, 1794
2W	c 7 ^h 21 ^m A.M.
3Th	Char. Children at St. Paul's
4F	Battle of Magenta, 1859
5S	Hango Massacre 1856
6S	2nd Sunday after Trinity
7M	Clock after Sun 1 ^m 27 ^s
8Tu	
9W	Sun rises 3 ^h 30 ^m
10Th	o 3 ^h 52 ^m A.M.
11F	St. Barnabas
12S	Trinity Term ends
13S	3rd Sunday after Trinity
14M	Clock after Sun 0 ^m 2 ^s
15Tu	Clock before Sun 0 ^m 9 ^s
16W	
17Th	Sun ris. 3 ^h 28 ^m o 2 ^h 15 ^m A.M.
18F	Battle of Waterloo, 1815
19S	Battle of Hochstadt, 1800
20S	4th Sunday after Trinity
21M	Proclamation
22Tu	Cambridge Term commence
23W	Clock before Sun 1 ^m 52 ^s
24Th	Midsmr. Dy. o 1 ^h 38 ^m A.M.
25F	Cambridge Term ends
26S	Sun rises 3 ^h 30 ^m
27S	5th Sunday after Trinity
28M	Coronation. Quarter Ses.
29Tu	St. Peter
30W	Clock after Sun 3 ^m 19 ^s



Novelties in Wedding Dresses.



Affleck and Brown's Annual Sale.

35

HABERDASHERY DEPARTMENT.—Continued.

DRESSMAKERS' LOTS.

One Dozen Reels, best quality, Coloured Pure Machine Silk, 25 yards on Reel, the very best quality, $5\frac{1}{2}$ d. per dozen

No. 81, Black Mohair Skirt Braid, 3 dozen yards for $10\frac{3}{4}$ d.

Black, White, or Grey Belting, best quality, $7\frac{1}{2}$ d. per dozen

New Tinsel Striped Belting, in Black, White, Light Blue, Dark Blue, and Scarlet, $8\frac{3}{4}$ d. per dozen

French Bodice Steels, in Black, Grey, White, Blue, Scarlet, &c.,

6 and 7 inch, $1\frac{3}{4}$ d., per dozen ... $1/8$ per gross

8 inch, 2d., per dozen ... $1/10\frac{1}{2}$ per gross

The Ten Shilling Parcel for Dressmakers containing—

12 yards Grey Belting
12 „ Black Belting
12 „ White Belting
1 dozen 6-in. Black Bodice Steels
1 „ 7-in. Black Bodice Steels
1 „ 8-in. Black Bodice Steels
1 „ 6-in. White Bodice Steels
1 „ 7-in. White Bodice Steels
1 „ 8-in. White Bodice Steels
1 „ Bundle Black Tape
1 piece No. 81 Black, all Wool Mohair Braid (3 dozen yards)

12 dozen Jet Dress Buttons, in three different patterns
24 dozen Good Metal Dress Buttons, fashionable and useful colours (no rubbish)
3 Fancy Metal Clasps
3 Cards Mantle Hooks and Eyes
1 gross Small Hooks and Eyes
 $\frac{1}{2}$ lb. Short White Brass Pins
3 dozen good Black Prussian Binding
1 dozen yards, $1\frac{3}{4}$ in., Black Gilt Cord Belting

The above is, perhaps, the best value ever offered in Dressmakers' Haberdashery. The original price of the Buttons alone was more money, 10/- for the lot

Plate 37. (Above) The original shop of John and Daniel Heelas in Reading in 1854. Most provincial department stores began in an equally small way. Heelas became a large town centre store and is now part of the John Lewis group.

Plate 38. (Below) Page advertising 'Dressmakers' Lots' from the 1896 January sale catalogue for Affleck and Brown in Manchester.

Chapter five

Dressmaking becomes a science

*'[The sewing machine's] one of those stupid affairs
That stands in a corner with what-nots and chairs'
(Chicago Working Man's Advocate 1873)*

Britain in the 1870s was a modern nation, at the cutting edge of science and technology. New developments - steel, the railways, the telegraph, anaesthesia - had changed life for ever. Technological change affected every corner of society, even the dressmaker's workroom.

Machines

A great deal has been written about the coming of the sewing machine and it is not my intention to duplicate that research. However, a very brief overview of its development may be useful.

Credit for the invention of the first viable sewing machine is usually given to the Frenchman, Thimonnier, though in the United States Thomas Saint had obtained a patent for a crude type of sewing machine for shoes in 1790. Lye had built a number of working wooden sewing machines by 1826 but none of these survive, for they were all destroyed in a fire in 1836. Thimonnier's machine was patented in France in 1830, and eighty of them were used in a factory manufacturing military uniforms. None of these survive, either; they were destroyed by a rioting mob in 1841, but the Science Museum in London has a working replica. It is cumbersome and could only ever have been used on thick, solid materials. Such machines seem to have required two operatives - one to turn the handle and one to guide the fabric.

There were a number of US patents for sewing machines in the 1830s and 40s, but the most promising one was Elias Howe's lock stitch machine, of 1846. In fact only six of these machines were built - number three is in the London Science Museum¹. (Plate 39) It is a tiny machine and the most striking thing about it is the 'baster plate' or fabric feed, which projects front and back. This consists of a straight strip of metal studded along one edge with sharp spikes. It would only have been possible to use it to sew in straight lines as the plate would have made it impossible to feed the fabric round in a curve². The spikes would certainly have damaged fine materials, and as it stood this machine could never have been viable.

¹ Accession number 1919.235

² In fact, according to Mike Harding of the London Science Museum, this feed mechanism is important only because it was taken up by the cinema as a way of progressing film.

Nonetheless, in demonstrations in 1845 it was shown that the machine could stitch five straight seams in the time it took a hand sewer to do one³. The credit for developing Howe's machine into a usable form goes to Thomas, a British corset manufacturer to whom Howe sold his patent. Thomas's patent for an improved version of Howe's machine dates from 1853.

Numerous competitors made adaptations, but the most effective machine was Singer's, of 1851, which was a treadle machine with a vertical body and horizontal arm, essentially very similar to modern domestic sewing machines. Sewing machines were in general use in the US well before they were readily available in Britain⁴.

Like Howe's, Singer's was a lock stitch machine. It used two threads, one from a spool on top of the machine and one from a shuttle inside it, that crossed and interlocked at every stitch. Modern sewing machines work on the lock stitch principle. Some of the early machines were chain stitch machines, using a single spindle and producing a chain stitch of interlocking loops - very much like single crochet, but worked through the fabric. The great disadvantage was that seams had to be finished off by hand, otherwise a tug on the loose end of the thread would cause the whole seam to unravel. By the 1860s, George White and Grover and Baker produced 'double chain stitch' machines using two threads, which were reasonably successful.

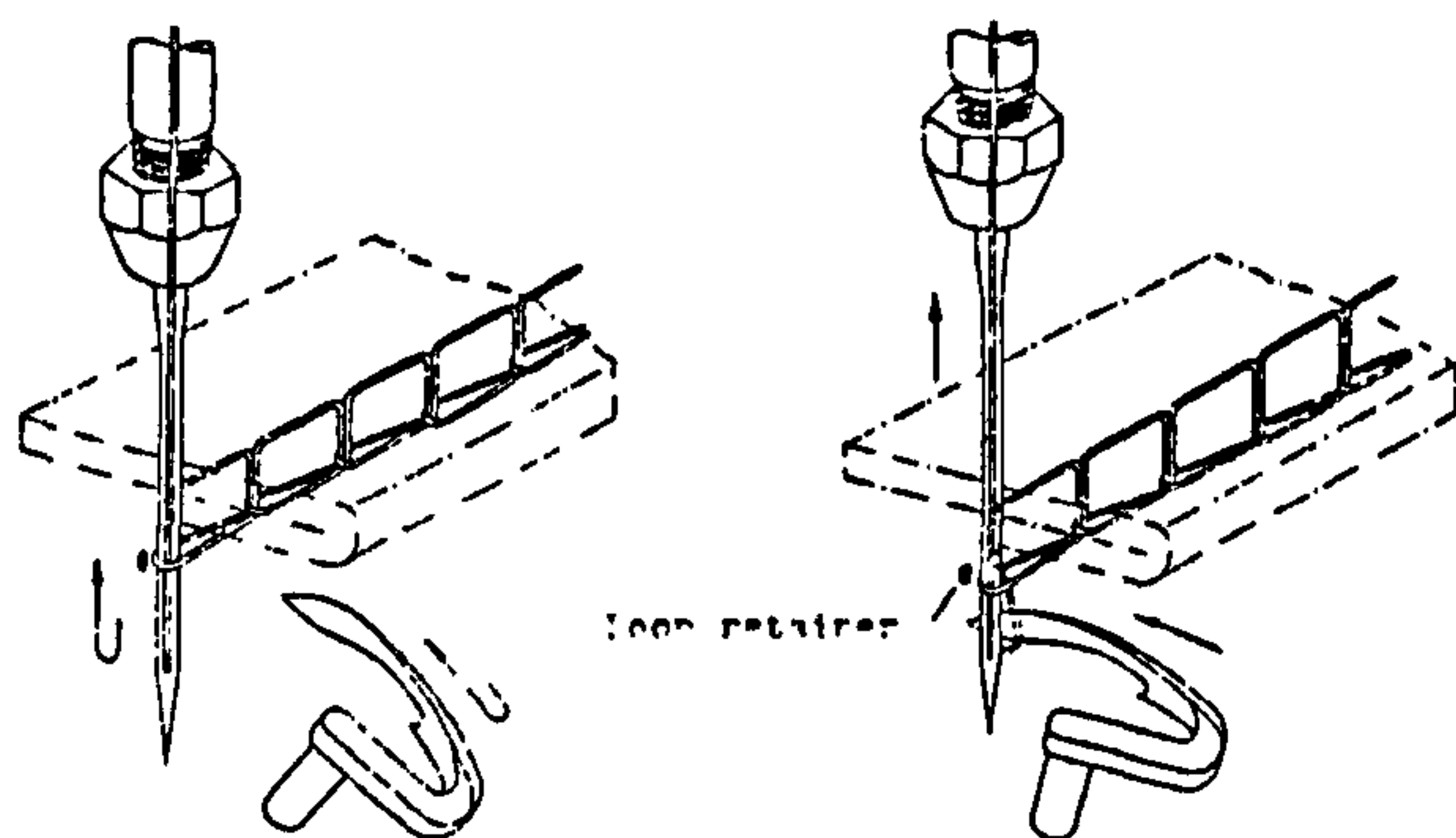
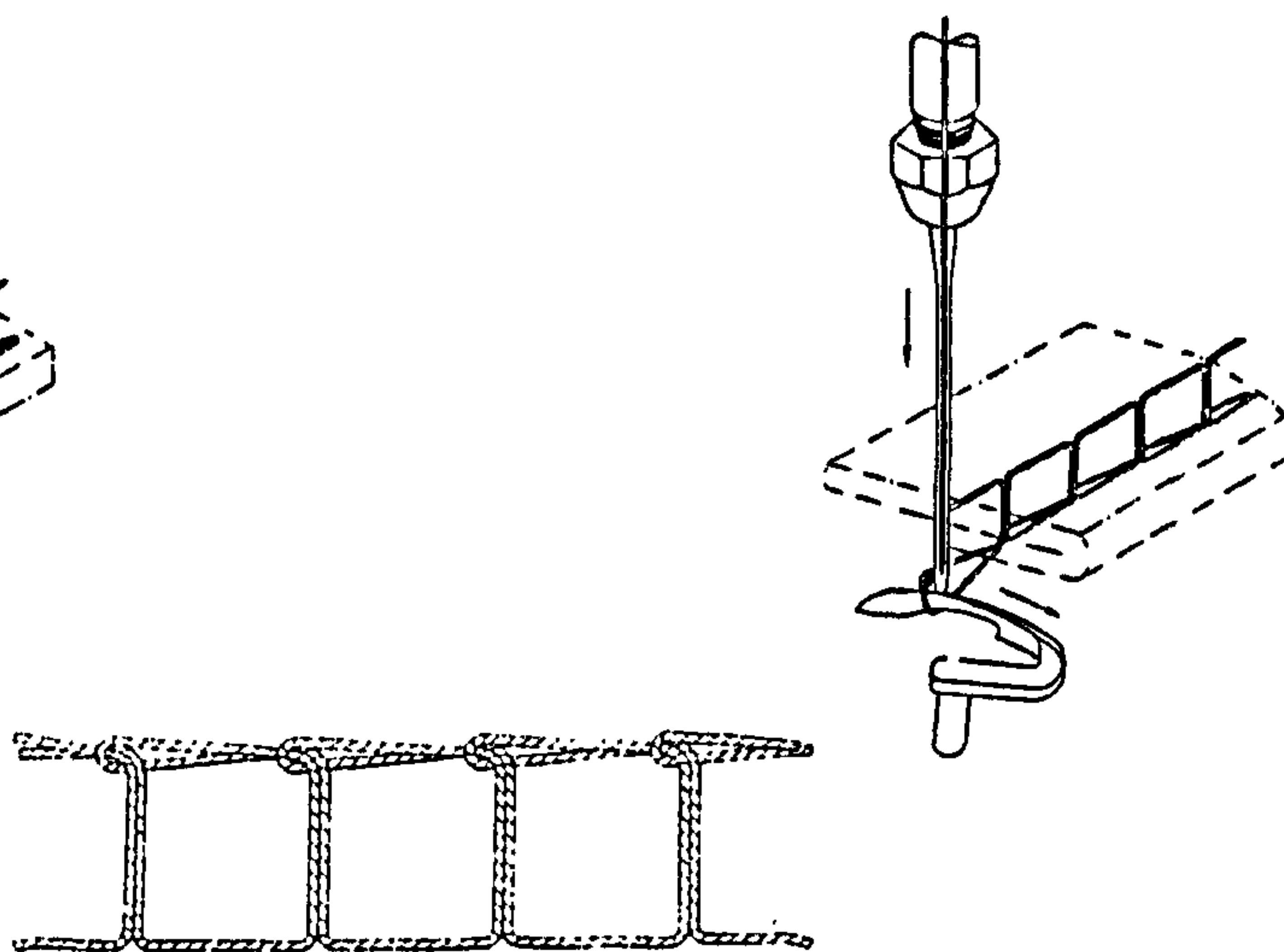


Figure 1
The formation of single thread chain stitch



³ Gardner, Deborah S 'A Paradise of Fashion: A T Stewart's Department Store 1862-75' in op cit, Jenson and Davidson (1997) p.71

⁴ Different authorities quote different figures. Andrew Godley ('Singer in Britain: The Diffusion of Sewing Machine Technology ---' *Textile History* 27 (1) 1996) claims that 42,500 machines were sold in the USA in 1859 and that by 1871 it was 422,000. The Singer advertisement of 1871 claims that in total 425,151 machines were produced in 1870 by seven US firms. Ava Baron and Susan E Klepp in 'If I didn't have my Sewing Machine ---' in op cit, Jenson and Davidson, (1979) p.32, give a rather different picture. They claim that 1609 machines were produced in 1853, 2054 in 1855, 38,105 in 1860, 65,497 in 1865 and 211,041 in 1870.

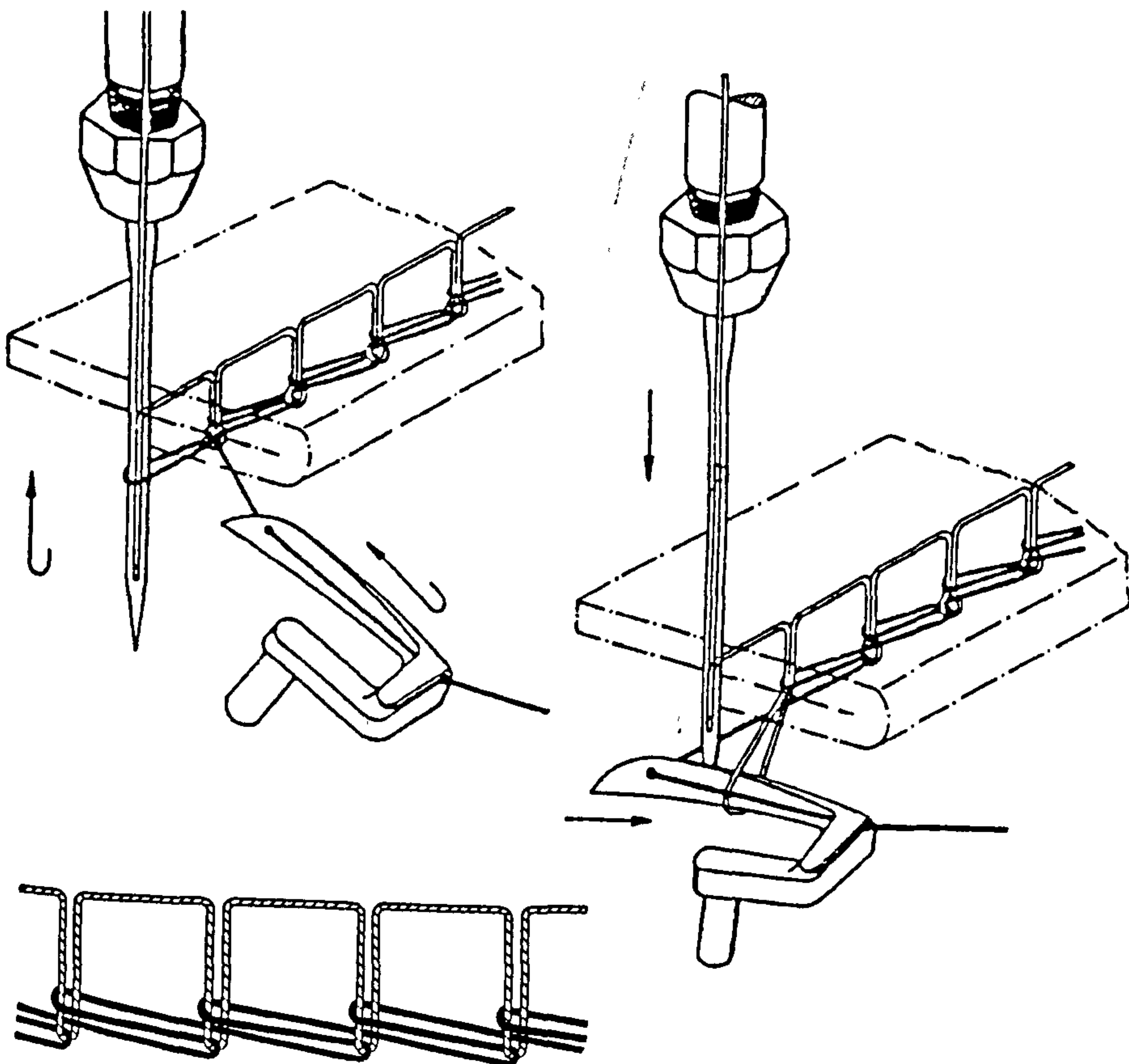


Figure 2
The formation of two-thread double chain stitch

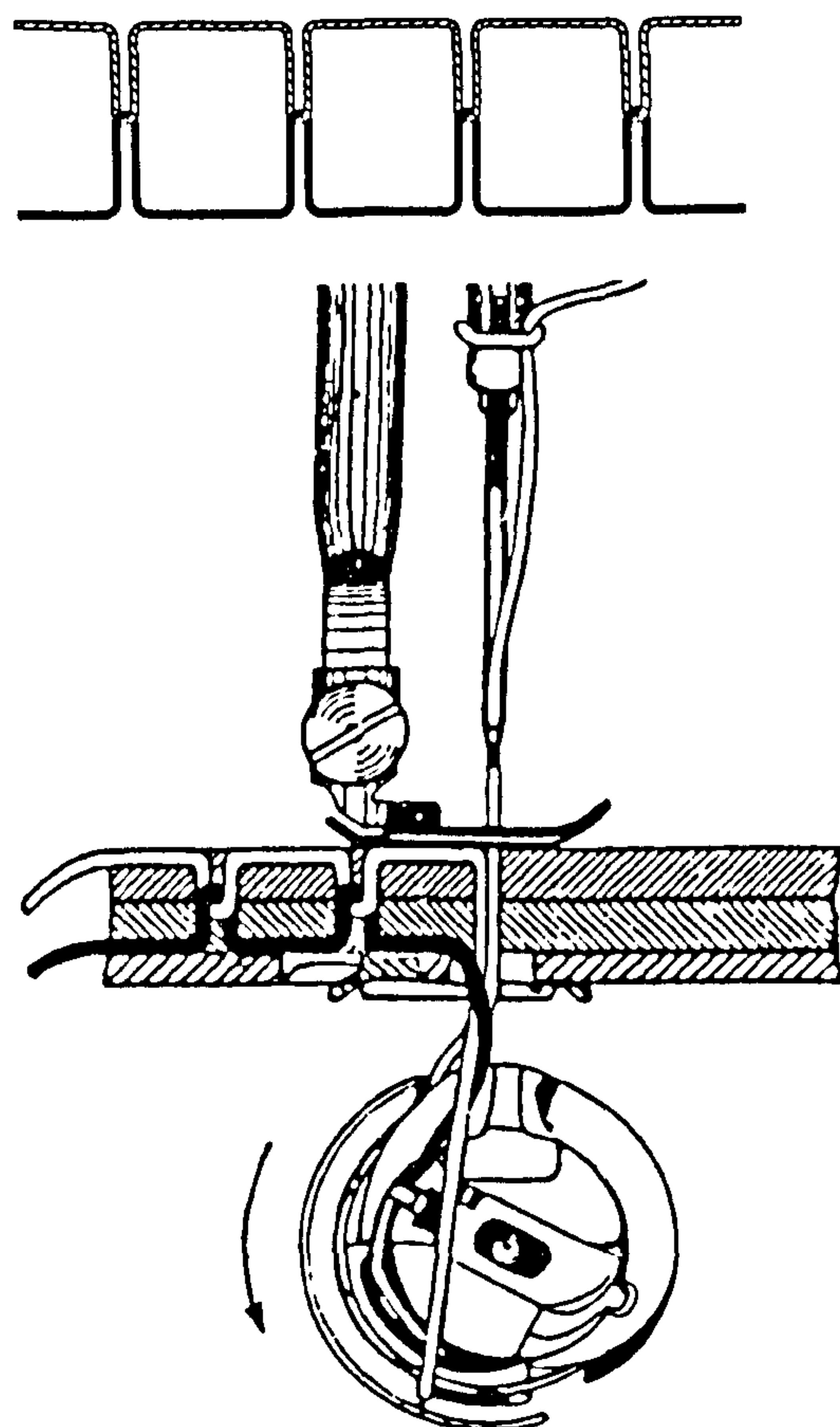


Figure 3
The formation of lock stitch

One chain stitch machine by Willcox and Gibbs was in continuous production from the 1860s to 1952. The 'Florence' machine, made in Florence, Massachusetts between 1860 and 1878, was the first machine to do a reverse stitch. This machine retailed in the UK for 10 guineas. It was one of the six machines recommended to readers by the Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine in April 1868. Another was Wright and Mann's 'Excelsior' 'which tucks, hems, frill, gathers, cords, quilts, braids and embroiders' - although there is little evidence on surviving garments that these facilities were much used. (Plate 40)

The magazine encouraged their readers to buy.

*'-- what lady can say that her sewing is less a tax upon her time and strength than it was before the sewing machine appeared? — As soon as lovely woman discovers that she can make ten stitches in the time that one used to require, a desire seizes her to put in ten times as many stitches in every garment as she formerly did.'*⁵

In December 1867, supposedly in response to enquiries from their readers, the same magazine had listed twelve London sewing machine suppliers, of whom five offered chain stitch machines. Prices ranged from

⁵ The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine, October 1867. In tests in the early 1860s, Wheeler and Wilson claimed that a hand sewer could create 23 stitches per minute to the machine's 640; a calico dress took 57 minutes by machine as opposed to 6 ½ hours by machine, and a shirt took just over an hour as opposed to fourteen (Gardner in Jenson and Davidson, op cit, 1979, p.71)

£2-15s to £15, though the majority were in the £9-£15 range, and the cheaper ones were all described as 'hand' machines. Again, the London Science Museum has a collection of these, some with clamps to attach them to the table top. They are tiny, the size of modern toy sewing machines, and could only ever have been used for light work⁶. (Plate 44) Indeed, one of the surprising things about nearly all the pre-1890 machines is their small size. Many of the standard sized ones are little larger than Howe's prototypes, and, despite their weighted bases, would surely have become unstable when faced with the sheer volume of fabric that went into most Victorian women's garments. It is difficult to see how such garments could have fitted under the machine arches.

Singer soon established themselves as the market leader, and by 1856 they were offering a 'family machine', and agreeing to take any old machine in part exchange. Technical improvements in the 1870s and 80s made Singer machines increasingly reliable. By 1871 a standard Singer machine retailed at £6-10s (Plates 42 and 43). Sales rose from something under 5000 a year in the UK in 1860 to 88,000 a year in 1865, to 142,700 in 1884, and they remained around that level for the rest of the century. Andrew Godley believes he has proved, by reference to Singer's sales figures in relation to areas of clothing production, that the bulk of these sales was to the clothing industry⁷.

At this point my approach to sewing machine history diverges from that of previous authors. They have looked at technological developments but have paid little attention to the evidence of women who owned machines, or to the evidence implicit in garments.

The 1861 census for Leicester records a handful of women already employed as '*sewing machinists*' or '*sewing machine hands*'. Some of them may have worked in industry, but some - like the younger sister of dressmaker Mary Norris, at 75, Humberstone Road - seem to have worked for dressmaking firms.

In 1864 the Children's Employment Commissioners reported that young teenage girls were being employed to help sewing machinists by threading bobbins. At Mrs King's in Milsom Street, Bath, they had

⁶ Nicholas Oddy in 'A Beautiful Ornament in the Parlour or Boudoir: the Domestication of the Sewing Machine' in Burman, Barbara, The Culture of Sewing. Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking (1999) pp.293-4, suggests that these machines were little more than toys and for very light use.

⁷ Op cit, Godley, Textile History 27 (1) 1996

been using sewing machines *'for several years'*⁸. The report also recorded the glowing testimonials for sewing machines that several dressmakers had given. As we have already noted, the commissioners do not always seem to have been clear in their aims and their interviewees were sometimes unsure what they were expected to say. Mrs H Gilling of Promenade Villas, Cheltenham (interviewee 88) believed that using machines had improved her worker's health *'I should like every dressmaker to use them'*. Mrs Brothers in Exeter (interviewee 125) was sure *'The introduction of the sewing machine has done away with the need of working as long hours as formerly'*, while Mrs Smith at Brunswick House in Cheltenham (interviewee 98) claimed that one of her staff, a slow worker who normally took a whole day to stitch *'a body'* could complete one in a quarter of an hour using a machine! But opinions were mixed. Some sewing machinists complained that the machines were tiring to work and left them *'all of a tremble'* and with back ache and pains in their sides⁹. We do not know how many of the firms investigated used machines as the commissioners were not consistent in their questioning, but it is interesting to discover any sewing machines in use at this early date¹⁰.

Between 1852 and 1856 American production was bedevilled by the 'sewing machine wars'. Having sold his patent to Thomas, Howe found numerous firms successfully manufacturing machines. Most of these were variants on his invention, and he embarked on a series of court cases suing for infringement. Other inventors followed suit. The manufacturers eventually formed a consortium and agreed to add an extra sum to the price of each machine to pay their legal costs. By the end of his life Howe was a rich man, and in his final six months, he and his brother established a factory to make improved Howe machines. (Plate 41) In fact, most sewing machine manufacturers made a huge profit - by 1870 it cost \$12 to produce a machine that sold for \$64¹¹.

Sewing machines were amongst the first machines to be produced for women. This necessitated some original marketing strategies. Some machines were highly decorated and were marketed as attractive

⁸ Interviewee 113a

⁹ See for example, Children's Employment Commission Vol XIV, p.78, and the testimony of 'Mrs B' (interviewee 175) at Mr Tawell's in St Paul's Churchyard.

¹⁰ Ibid. NB Interviews for this report took place in 1861-2.

¹¹ Op cit, Baron and Klepp in Jenson and Davidson, (1979), p.36

furnishings¹². The 1870 Remington 'Empire' model in the Science Museum has a base painted with elaborate sprays of roses, for example¹³, while the Newton and Wilson 'Cleopatra' model, a chain stitch machine, is cast in a fancy design in wrought iron¹⁴. (Plates 45 a and b)

Many were sold to dressmakers and seamstresses on hire purchase schemes. The working classes were used to the idea of pawning goods and buying on credit. Hire purchase was a logical extension of that. Seamstresses who bought machines in this way were under enormous pressure to keep up payments - if they did not earn enough and defaulted, the supplier simply repossessed the machine, regardless of how much they had paid on it. Some women reported that they had nearly paid for, but lost, several machines¹⁵. Hiring a machine by the week was expensive but a better option.

Sewing machines tended to be temperamental and firms advertised for staff who were familiar with specific makes of machine. For example, in 1875, John Cooper of Grantham wanted someone to work a Wheeler and Wilson's machine¹⁶ while Adderleys of Leicester wanted a hand to work a Howe machine¹⁷. Different machines worked in different ways. The author of Practical Dressmaking in the 1870s, explained how *'with some machines it is best to put a gored side of a skirt on the teeth, while with others it is best to put the straight edge downwards and ease in the gored one with the fingers on top ---'*¹⁸. She therefore described all processes as they would be done by hand and left sewing machine owners to adapt her instructions to their own machines as best they could. Different machines

¹² Oddy in op cit Burman (1999) argues that the decoration on sewing machines was in line with the 19th century practice of decorating precision machinery rather than a marketing ploy to attract female buyers. Furthermore, he suggests that the type of decoration that appeared on sewing machines (black japanning and gold) set precedents for the decoration of other types of 'domestic' machinery - like phonographs and bicycles.

¹³ Accession number 1870.123. Remington also manufactured typewriters with similar decoration.

¹⁴ Accession number 1868.8. See also chapter one, p.63 and plate 7b, p. 73 for examples of gender orientated advertising

¹⁵ Schmiechen, James, Sweated Industry and Sweated Labour, the London clothing trades 1860-1914 (1984) p.27

¹⁶ Leicester Daily Post January 16th 1875

¹⁷ Ibid, September 1st, 1875

¹⁸ Monroe, R, Practical Dressmaking (1879) (Introduction)

were easier to manage than others and Thomas's machines had a reputation for being particularly heavy to work¹⁹

A survey of the dresses in Leicester Museum's costume collection provided some interesting insights into the use of sewing machines. As far as I am aware, no previous researcher has systematically examined a collection in this way before. I checked all available dresses of the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s²⁰. Of the 1850s dresses, 8 out of 27 were made wholly or partly by machine - a surprisingly high percentage given Andrew Godley's estimate of sewing machine sales pre-1860. However, a closer examination of these shows that dressmakers did not find their machines very reliable. All of the machine-made dresses had bodices that were lined with strong cotton fabric as was usual at the period. The technique was to tack the lining and dress fabric together and then to treat them as a single piece. The coarse cotton made fine muslin or silk acceptable to the machine. Long skirt seams, which would seem to be the most suitable part of the garment for machine-stitching, were only machine-stitched in garments of robust fabrics, or garments where the skirt was fully lined. Seams in skirts of unlined muslin or silk were hand-stitched even in dresses with machine-stitched bodices, presumably because the machine would have puckered or torn flimsy fabric. In only two cases were sleeves put in by machine, even when the rest of the bodice was machine-stitched. Setting sleeves is a tricky process, and most Victorian dresses had very little spare fabric at the sleeve head. Again, dressmakers do not seem to have trusted their machines to be manoeuvrable or reliable enough to deal with these more complicated seams. Mrs Gilling, interviewed in the early 1860s confirmed this when she said her staff used a machine for '*all the main seams*' implying that some work still had to be done by hand²¹.

By the 1860s, 25 out of 33 dresses were machine-made, and the machines were being used much more for skirt and armhole seams²². By the 1870s, 24 out of 29 dresses were machine made and machinists

¹⁹ Children's Employment Commission, Vol XIV, pp. 135 and 137

²⁰ Four dresses were unavailable because they were on display or undergoing conservation.

²¹ Children's Employment Commission, Vol XIV, interviewee 88

²² In 1894 Jeanette Davis described how a machinist should set a sleeve neatly (The Elements of Modern Dressmaking, p.47) '*If the machinist can keep a length of galloon or Paris binding outside the seam whilst she is machining, and stitch through one edge of it, the other edge can be closely overcast with the turnings, which will make the arm-hole flat and well-finished; ---*' Even at this date she was recommending that shoulder seams should be stitched properly before being handed over to the machinist - tacking was just not secure enough. In fact, few machine-made shoulder seams are as beautifully finished as Miss Davis would have liked.

were becoming much more confident. Garments were usually completely machine-made and some even have decorative machine top-stitching²³. If Leicestershire's collection is typical - and there is no reason to suppose it is not - dressmakers, both home and commercial, were quick to acquire sewing machines. It is not, of course, possible to tell with any degree of certainty whether a 19th century garment was made at home or made professionally.

We do, however, know something about the making of just one of the museum's 1860s machine-stitched dresses. The garment in question belonged to Clara Dare, daughter of Joseph Dare, head of the Leicester Domestic Mission which was founded by the Unitarians to work amongst the Leicester poor. Joseph Dare held this post from 1845 to 1876, at a salary of £75 a year, on which he maintained a wife and a family of seven children²⁴. A dress made for his adult daughter, Clara, in the early 1860s, is in Wygston's House Museum. In such a household

'New dresses were not easily come by. When a length of material came to hand by gift or purchase, all hands were requisitioned to help the visiting dressmaker. Clara was not a heaven born seamstress and it is doubtful whether her help was of much avail'.

Unfortunately, in the case of this particular dress *'When it was quite finished, lined, and a braid sewn round the bottom, Clara felt that --- to her soul it was entirely alien'* She scarcely wore it, and it soon ended up in her nieces' dressing up box²⁵. (Plate 47) It is not hard to see why. The dress is ugly. It is made of a coarse, hairy, cream, woollen fabric with fine purple stripes, and is lavishly trimmed with garish purple ribbon and fringe. But it is well made, with neat, even, machine-stitched seams. The 'visiting dressmaker' employed by the Dares was technically competent, even if she had no eye for design. She, or they, had a sewing machine, at a time when sewing machines were still a novelty, and what is even more unusual, it was a good, well-maintained one, that made even stitches, did not pucker the fabric, and had threads that do not seem to have broken every few inches.

Nearly all the machine-made dresses in Leicester's collection were made using lock-stitch machines, but three were stitched with a chain-stitch machine. Of these, one, a coarsely made black and white dress of fine wool, c.1860 (454.1970) is entirely chain-stitched. The other two - a warp printed silk of the late 1850s (1122.1951) (Plates 79 and 82) and a brown striped silk of c.1868 (1059.1967) are partly chain-

²³ For example, on a tan silk dress of c.1875 (210.1955).

²⁴ Nine children were born to the family but two daughters died of fever in 1836. Haynes, Barry, Working Class Life in Victorian Leicester, the Joseph Dare reports (1991) p. 10

²⁵ Op cit, Ellis, (1935), p.89

stitched, partly lock-stitched and partly hand-stitched. The probability is that the 1850s dress was altered twice, once in the 1860s and again in the 1890s. The brown silk was almost certainly altered c.1868 as the fashionable skirt shape changed, by someone with a lock stitch machine

Dressmakers seem to have acquired sewing machines as soon as they reasonably could and by 1887 even the Liverpool Review's 'cheap dressmaker' had one on hire²⁶. Undoubtedly machine sewing was much quicker than hand sewing, though the estimates that garments could be made up to 14 times faster (see footnote 5) seem wildly optimistic. Machines were not expensive. By 1871 a viable machine cost just £6-10s. With an average profit of 5s a dress and the saving in time and wages a machine would soon pay for itself. There is no evidence to suggest that this cost was passed on to the customer in the form of increased prices. Other types of machine were adopted much less readily, however.

In the USA in 1860 there were two patents for fitting Singer-type lock stitch machines with a '*hand-operated gadget with which to move the cloth laterally from side to side in order to produce a buttonhole*'²⁷. Between then and 1881, when John Reece patented the first buttonholing machine to meet industrial requirements, there were eighteen other US patents for such machines. In fact, they were nearly all attachments for standard sewing machines, and many firms produced them. At least a dozen pre-1890 machines in the Science Museum collection have button hole attachments. (Plate 46) In August 1868, The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine informed their readers of a device produced by Messrs Newton Wilson. It cost £12 and was a lock stitch sewing machine with a buttonhole-making and over-seaming apparatus. We do not know how successful that one was, but it was the Reece machine that was the first really viable one. It was designed to cut buttonholes to a pre-set shape and then stitch round them with a zigzag chain stitch²⁸. By the 1880s advertisements appeared in women's magazines for making button holes by machine at so much a dozen. The machines themselves do not seem to have been bought by dressmakers - £12 was a lot of money - and with apprentices like Ellen Gill available to stitch them by hand, dressmaking firms did not need to incur the outlay²⁹. There are no examples of machine-stitched buttonholes among the 1880s and 1890s dresses in the Leicester collection, and Jeanette Davis's 1894

²⁶ Op cit, Jarvis (1981) pp.17-18

²⁷ Godfrey, Frank P, The History of the Sewing Machine (1982) pp. 96-7

²⁸ Ibid, p.253

²⁹ See chapter two, p. 84

manual makes no mention of them, despite devoting a full chapter to buttons and button hole making. Even today many women prefer not to struggle with the button hole attachment to their sewing machines.

In the late 1870s advertisements appeared for permanent pleating using the '*Wanzer kilting machine*'. Wanzer were a sewing machine company, based in Hamilton, Ontario, but with branches in London and Paris³⁰. The prices quoted were not high - a machine that would pleat a 6 inch width cost 35s, one that would do a 10 inch width cost £3 - but private dressmakers do not seem to have invested in these - an apprentice with an iron was a much cheaper option. However, the workroom at White's of Ipswich had a kilting machine valued at 2 guineas at the time their inventory was made in 1878. According to their advertisements Wanzer's kilting (or plaiting) machines were '*closely imitated in appearance by other makers*', but the only other advertisement I have seen was for '*Fricker's Patent Plaiting Machine*'³¹ (Plate 48).

Dresses of the 1870s and 80s often had bands of pleated decoration. (Plate 49) For dressmakers without facilities to produce these, there were 'kilting establishments'. Throughout the 1880s advertisements appeared in the Leicester papers '*Take all your kilting to Spencer's Kilting Establishment, 18 Regent Street --- 200 varieties of plaiting*'³². Even in unfashionable Alnwick, Dodds' dressmaking workroom supplied kilting. As early as July 1873 they re-trimmed a dress for Miss Thew of Shortridge with a kilted flounce - and charged her 12s for it. They also seem to have had their own kilting machine as there are several references to lengths of kilting being sent to clients - for example, on August 11th 1882 they sent a length of kilting '*separate*' to a Mrs Aitchison and in April 1883 they made two yards of kilted merino for Miss Thompson of Bailiffgate. Unfortunately they omitted to record the prices of these transactions separately.

Out of 55 1870s and 80s dresses in the Leicester collection, 15 have kilted trimmings. The width of the trimmings varies - from less than an inch to over a foot - as does the depth of the pleats, but I could find

³⁰ Op cit, Godfrey, (1982), pp.97, 109, 114.

³¹ For both advertisements, see The Sewing Machine Gazette and Journal of Domestic Appliances, July 1879. This journal is unobtainable. I have only seen a photocopy of the advertisement; the original is privately owned and inaccessible.

³² See, for example, The Leicester Chronicle, April 3rd 1880

examples of only two styles of pleating. Spencer's seem to have had few takers for 198 of the varieties they offered!

Lay figures

Until the 1870s women's skirts did not need careful fitting; only the length and the size of the waist were important. The fullness varied from decade to decade, but skirts never hugged the figure, and though sometimes they were quite heavily decorated, the decoration was applied rather than integral. In the 1870s, however, skirts grew more complicated, and it became important to have some way of holding them so that they could be draped elegantly. *'It is most difficult to arrange skirt draperies, such as trains in poufs, or scarves diagonally, etc., when the skirt is spread flat on a table --'* wrote Ms Monroe in 1879. She was adamant that it was uneconomic to use a worker to model the skirt and recommended Alexander Watts, 24 Whitfield Street or Messrs Wells and Son of Wood Street as suppliers of lay figures with french bodies and wire skirts. French bodies were cloth-covered so garments could be pinned in position and provided *'more substance than a mere wire cage --- under the bodice to show its effect'*³³.

Soon there were numerous firms producing life-size lay figures for dressmakers. (Plate 51) Some figures were made of cane or wire, others were solid with detachable wire 'skirts'. Prices varied. Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion recommended wicker stands in May 1881 at 1s-11d *'for brushing or mending'* and at 2s-11d for fitting. In December 1888 she advertised Grabham's folding and adjustable dress stand at 10s-6d. Firms seem to have sent Myra goods to appraise. Florence White gave a list of equipment needed for a teaching workroom at the beginning of her Easy Dressmaking and recommended the purchase of a figure from Hall's for 25s *'but a cheaper wicker one would do'* at home³⁴. Silber and Flemming's catalogue of 1883 described *'french bodies'* and advertised one with *'adjustable hips'* - in fact this simply allowed for an enlarged bustle³⁵. By the 1890s, H Jules, the French bust company at 254 Tottenham Court Road advertised individually customised lay figures *'any figure copied from a bodice'* and claimed to be patronised by eleven royal families and *'thousands'* of members of the English

³³ Op cit, Monroe (1879) p.54

³⁴ White, Florence, Easy Dressmaking (1892) introduction

³⁵ Bosomworth, D (intro), The Victorian Catalogue of Household Goods (originally published by Silber and Flemming as The illustrated Catalogue of Furniture and Household Requisites c.1883 - reprinted 1994) p.324

and foreign nobility and gentry³⁶. (Plate 50) Mrs Grenfell recommended their busts for teaching purposes. They had been in existence at least as early as 1881. The May issue of Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion included an advertisement in which they claimed to have exhibited at '*The Dressmakers' Exhibition [at the] Marlborough Rooms*' in connection with the Scientific Dress Cutting Association of Regent's Circus. The same issue also advertised the Dressmakers' Supplies Stores who offered '*Economy - Certainty - Promptitude - Price*'.

For the dressmaker visiting London, an increasing variety of goods and services were available.

Paper patterns

Eighteenth and early 19th century dresses did not demand great accuracy of fit. Even stiff 18th century bodices overlapped and fastened with pins, or had the front opening concealed by a stomacher, which would have hidden many discrepancies. Full skirts, draped over panniers or petticoats, or looped up into polonaises, bore no relationship to the girth of the figure below. Early 19th century bodices relied on gathering strings and flaps that overlapped, and skirts, though narrower, were still loose. Contemporary dressmakers, according to The Book of Trades of 1811, took '*the pattern off from a lady by means of a piece of paper or cloth. The pattern, if taken in cloth becomes afterwards the lining of the dress*'. Taking a pattern by unpicking an existing dress that fitted the client was an easier solution and The Book of Trades recommended it to amateurs. (Plate 52)

The 19th century saw a number of inventions that eased the dressmaker's lot. Probably the first of these was the development of the inch tape measure in the 1820s. Previously dressmakers and tailors had taken measurements with strips of paper tape which they cut to the correct length for the customers' various dimensions and then stored in bundles. It took some time for tape measures to come into general use and even towards the end of the century, strange sets of graded tapes - the marking relating to particular customer sizes rather than to imperial measures - were in use. A set survives in the Staffordshire County Museum.

In 1843 The Ladies Handbook of Millinery, Dressmaking and Tatting defined what was probably normal practice:-

'Take the proper measures for the front and back of the body by fitting a paper pattern to the shape of the person for whom the dress is intended. The paper should be thin, and you

³⁶ Advertisement in the Drapers' Record, 1895

*commence by folding down the corner the length of the front, and pinning it to the middle of the stay bone. Then let the paper be spread as smoothly as possible along the bosom to the shoulder, and fold it in plait a so as to fit the shape exactly ---*³⁷.

Basically, the technique was to fold and cut pieces of tissue paper against the body until a usable pattern was created. It was not as easy as it sounds. Claudia Kidwell describes this as the 'pin-to-fit' method³⁸.

It required a fair degree of expertise to make pattern pieces up to fit a real, perhaps irregular, figure. Today, orthopaedic surgery can correct many deformities, and we tend to forget just how many women in the past had defects they needed to conceal.

Most home sewers probably preferred the diagrams that appeared in The Ladies' Economical Assistant of 1808 or in The Workwoman's Guide of 1838. These relied heavily on measured geometric shapes - women's chemises and nightdresses, men's shirts and children's smocks were all created from squares, oblongs and triangles of fabric. The Ladies' Economical Assistant contained fold-out patterns; The Workwoman's Guide gave detailed cutting diagrams which recommended cutting out several items together to utilise the full width of the cloth and minimise wastage. (Plates 53 and 54)

Experienced dressmakers had probably always had their own informal pattern drafting systems, based on observation and experience, but as early as the 1830s there were firms which provided patterns for professional dressmakers. In October 1836 The World of Fashion advertised:-

'-- every new style of dress, exquisitely formed in the exact models and colours in which they are worn, consisting of full length and small size French paper. Millinery and dresses of every description, sleeves, trimmings, etc., etc., - sold at 10s per set (comprising four articles) packed for any part of the Kingdom at 3s extra. To Ladies in Business requiring their own materials made up during their stay in London, Madame and Mrs F[ollet]'s establishment offers a combination of first-rate ability, with most moderate charges ---'

The following April, Madame and Mrs Follet -

'Milliners, Court Dressmakers, and Original Importers of French Paper Fashions, 53, New Bond Street, London and Rue Richelieu, Paris' advertised again 'Fashion Unrivalled. Town and Country Milliners and Dressmakers are respectfully invited to inspect the new

³⁷ Waugh, Nora, The Cut of Women's Clothes, 1968, p.188

³⁸ Kidwell, Claudia B, Cutting a Fashionable Fit: Dressmaker's Drafting Systems in the United States (1979) Introduction

*Fashions just imported by Madame and Mrs Follet from their house at Paris, replete with every novelty and design and formed with exquisite taste, in coloured French paper --*⁸⁹

As early as 1841, full-size fold-out patterns were published in the French magazine Le Journal des Demoiselles. In November 1849 another pattern making firm advertised in The World of Fashion.

'IMPORTANT TO COUNTRY MILLINERS. Mrs Dewsbury, Paper Pattern and Bonnet Shape Establishment, 3, Rathbone Place, Oxford Street, Established 1834. Mrs Dewsbury respectfully announces to her numerous customers that her showrooms are now open with a large selection of the Newest Designs in full sized Paper Patterns consisting of Dresses, Cloaks, Mantelets, Spencers, Bodices, Sleeves etc. --- Patterns forwarded to all parts of the Kingdom at the undermentioned prices: A set of twelve Articles, with Box, £1.2.0.; a set of six ditto with Box, 11s.6d.; A large Article, postage paid, 3s-6d'.

Published dressmaker patterns evolved at much the same time in Germany, France, England and America. In America Godey's Magazine pioneered the use of pattern diagrams in the 1850s, while the first published paper patterns in the UK appeared in August 1850 in The World of Fashion:-

'FIRST COLLECTION OF PATTERNS for fashionable Dresses and Millinery which we propose continuing every month in order that Ladies of Distinction, and their Milliners and Dressmakers, may possess the utmost facilities for constructing their costumes with the Most Approved Taste and in the Highest and Most Perfect Style of Fashion.'

The German Bekleidungskunst für Damen Allgemeine Muster-Zeitung also produced paper patterns in the early 1850s. (Plates 55 a and b)

By the 1860s dress patterns were quite common and all sorts of magazines included them. The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine was giving away 'full size' tissue paper patterns by 1860. These were single size (small), and it still needed a good deal of skill to scale them up to fit a normal figure. Within a few years many magazines contained such patterns, and manufacturers were beginning to offer a range of services. For a fee, patterns could be adjusted to fit the maker's measurements. For a further fee, firms would cut out a toile, or even the maker's own fabric. The Ladies' Treasury for 1878, for example, carried advertisements for a Madame Vevey, who would '*send, post free, paper patterns untrimmed, but tacked and pinned together to form a perfect pattern, and with an extra pattern by which to cut the design*'. Ostensibly, these services were aimed at home dressmakers, but dresses of the 1870s were more complicated than ever before, and probably beyond the range of most amateurs.

³⁹ Quoted in op cit, Arnold (1964) p.10. The Follets subsequently produced a magazine Le Follet, Courrier des Salons

The Girls' Own Paper was a magazine for working girls. In March 1895 'in consequence of the repeated requests made' they began to offer paper patterns to their readers.

'This garment will be selected specially and carefully with a view to the everyday wants of our girl readers, who are so sensibly economical as to make and remake their clothing at home. One pattern only is procurable monthly, making twelve patterns during the year, a number quite sufficient for the wants of an average English girl. One medium size is given of thirty six inches round the shoulders which can be reduced or increased --'

This is interesting, partly because of the condescending approach and partly because of the emphasis on pattern size.

Some dressmaking manuals also contained diagrams or fold-out patterns. For example, Elise Mangold's Lady's Dressmaking School for All Time, published, in German in Harburg in 1861, contains only 29 pages of dressmaking instructions in the popular question-and-answer format, but has measuring diagrams, 'tabelle' of illustrations of pattern pieces, and three basic fold-out pattern shapes - bodice front, bodice back and sleeve - in cardboard. These are printed with a series of concentric cutting lines which are punched at intervals with holes. The pieces could be adapted for a range of sizes by marking through the holes on to paper or fabric. (Plates 56 a and b)

Pattern designing and making soon became an industry. Ebenezer Butterick, in America, a former tailor, began by producing graded patterns for men's and boys' shirts in the 1860s. In 1863-5 he moved to New York to bring his invention to a wider market. He mass-produced his patterns and used aggressive selling techniques to bring them to the market's attention. By 1871 he was employing a staff of 140 and selling 23,000 patterns a year. Female designers sketched dress styles, those that were approved were made up in muslin, and then taken apart. From these pieces of muslin, draftsmen drew pattern sections in graded sizes on thick card. These were the templates from which tissue paper pieces were created. These were then put in labelled packets, along with illustrations and instructions, and retailed for 10c a pack. The empire prospered from its headquarters at Butterick Fashion House on Broadway. Drapers and sewing machine salesmen were persuaded to become agents for Butterick's, and as early as 1867 it was estimated that even in a small town a Butterick agent could increase his annual profit by \$200-300. By 1872 there were 1100 such agencies. Butterick also advertised his patterns in his own magazines - Ladies' Report of New York Fashions (established 1867) and Metropolitan Monthly (established 1868).⁴⁰.

⁴⁰ Walsh, Margaret, 'The Democratisation of Fashion: the Emergence of the Women's Dress Pattern Industry', Journal of American History 66, (1979-80)

Butterick had a stand at the 1876 Philadelphia Exhibition, as did one of his rivals, Mme Demorest. Ellen Louise Curtis started out as a milliner's apprentice in up-state New York in the 1850s. She then moved to New York and married William Jennings Demorest, a merchant. They had a fashionable store in New York, sent patterns by mail order to out-of-town dressmakers, sold all sorts of dressmaking supplies and ran no fewer than five fashion magazines. By the mid 1870s both firms expanded overseas, Mme Demorest to Paris⁴¹, and Ebenezer Butterick to premises in London where, in 1874 he invested \$65,000 in a shop on Regent Street. The firm flourished, and further depots were set up in Berlin, Frankfurt, Vienna, Amsterdam and St Petersburg⁴². Madame Demorest retired in 1887.

James McCall founded the McCall Paper Pattern Company in New York in 1870. He was a Scottish tailor, in New York to promote the 'Royal Chart' measuring system. In London, Christopher Edward Weldon established Weldon's Ladies Journal of Dress, Fashion, Needlework, Literature and Art in 1879 and issued free paper patterns. There were numerous other firms producing patterns by the 1880s⁴³.

No doubt many dressmakers had collections of fashion plates and patterns, but few survive. Hannah Allinson in Whitehaven subscribed to Le Follet and Young Ladies Journal at 9s and 4s-6d a half year respectively. She was also an agent for Marie Bayard (9, Southampton Street, Covent Garden) '*Modelist in Dress Paper Patterns*'. At the end of her first quarter's agency she had 32 patterns in hand, valued at 13s-8d and a pattern book valued at 17s-8d. She also bought copies of Illustrated Dressmaker, Weldon's Journal and Bouquet of Fashion in dozens, presumably to sell to her clients. The receipts survive⁴⁴. A little collection of fashion illustrations, stitched together by hand, is in Leicestershire Record Office, but there is nothing to indicate whether it was part of a dressmaker's stock or whether it belonged to a private individual⁴⁵.

⁴¹ The Demorest Manufacturing Co produced sewing machines between 1882 and 1909

⁴² Op cit, Walsh (1979-80)

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Cumbria RO YDB17

⁴⁵ Leics RO DE1936/67

Dressmaking entrepreneurs

A training in dressmaking offered opportunities to the talented or enterprising worker. One of the earliest of these was Mrs Eliza Ann Cory, who published The Art of Dressmaking in 1849 for the '*industrious daughters of tradesmen and --- persons of limited means*'⁴⁶. It was a tiny book, just four by three and a half inches and only 25 pages long, and her instructions were rudimentary. To arrive at a pattern she advised her readers to use an old, unpicked bodice as a basis and then adapt it using a combination of measurements and pin-to-fit. Her only comment on sleeves was '*No directions can be given for sleeves as fashion alone guides the shape of them*', while she considered skirt making so simple that '*any one who would attempt a body would know how to make them ---*'⁴⁷. It is unlikely that her readers learnt a great deal. Nonetheless, Mrs Cory was convinced of her ability to teach. On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays she received pupils at her residence - 8, Constitution Row, Gray's Inn Road - and on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays she taught ladies in their own homes '*if in parties of four*'. A course of six lessons at Mrs Cory's cost 7s-6d '*including patterns of Mantle, Sleeves, etc.*' but for her home pupils she charged a full guinea⁴⁸.

There were entrepreneurs in the publishing trade whose contribution to the development of dress patterns was just as great as that of Butterick, McCall and Weldon, but whose names have faded into obscurity. The most prominent of these was probably Madame Marie Schild. She had showrooms at 37, Tavistock Street, Covent Garden which she claimed were the largest in England. She cut patterns to ladies' own measurements, carried large stocks of patterns which were available by mail order, both at home and abroad, specialised in patterns for fancy dress costumes and published numerous magazines and albums for all levels of the market. Her business was established in 1852, when paper patterns were still a novelty, but Madame Schild really came to the fore in 1870 as editress of The Brighton Courier of Fashion and The Drapers' and Milliners' Gazette of Fashion.

The Brighton Courier was produced for three months of the year - November, December and January - to coincide with the Brighton season. It was published in London but was to '*be had of all booksellers in Brighton*' because, the first issue explained:-

⁴⁶ Op cit, Cory, (1849) preface

⁴⁷ Ibid p.25

⁴⁸ Ibid, cover

'The principal occupation of society in Brighton, during the season, is to promenade during the daylight; soirees, balls, and dinner parties at night; at all of which it is the desire of the ladies to appear the best'.

The paper contained fashion plates and copious descriptions of fashionable dress, a '*Fashionable resume*' which detailed the main events of the social calendar and who had hosted them, lists of dressmakers recommended (no doubt for a fee) '*for possessing good style with moderate charges*'⁴⁹ and numerous advertisements, many of them for Madame Schild's other publications. The Brighton Courier seems to have ceased publication in 1873⁵⁰. (Plate 58)

The Drapers' and Milliners' Gazette of Fashion was a magazine aimed at the trade rather than private individuals. It contained fashion plates, descriptions of fashions and a free tissue paper pattern for one of the dresses shown. It was one of two English fashion magazines (the Ladies' Treasury was the other) to which French editors sold plates to be printed under a different imprimatur⁵¹. The magazine also offered a course of dressmaking 'lessons', and lots of advertisements for goods and services. It was, effectively, the first trade journal for dressmakers and was printed, monthly, by Samuel Miller at 37, Tavistock Street. An annual subscription cost 14s, post free. Paper patterns were available for most of the dresses illustrated - or for the trickier parts of them. Prices ranged from 4s-6d to 6s-6d for full patterns, and 2s to 2s-6d for part patterns. These, together with '*Every requisite for trade purposes*' and subscriptions to the magazine were available from Samuel Miller, who seems to have been in partnership with Mme Schild. All sorts of trade goods were offered for sale. F A Hancock of 37-38 Wood Street, Cheapside, advertised bill heads, labels and '*Draper's Stationery*'; Thomas Lomas of Manchester sold woven address labels; there were Wanzer kilting machines and hosiery machines; pentagraph tracing wheels; stocking suspenders at 3s-2d, 5s-2d and 7s-2d; dressmakers pinking irons from Paris; lead punching blocks (10s) and mallets (5s-6d) for embossing fabric; hem measuring devices and lay figures, and all sorts of fabrics and trimmings⁵². (Plate 59)

⁴⁹ They were Mrs J Hawkes, 60 Old Steyne; the Misses Dagg and Foster, North-street; Mrs Brown, 52 Middle-street; Mrs Moon, 2 Broad-street and Miss Morling, 109 St James-street. The advertisement appeared in almost every issue

⁵⁰ The British Library copy contains a note to the publisher, Samuel Miller, requesting copyright issues for 1872 and 1873 - which might suggest that it ceased even earlier.

⁵¹ Moore, Doris Langley, Fashion through Fashion Plates 1771-1970, (1971) p.16

⁵² All in 1871

In 1874 Mme Schild was advertising patterns based on *'a New method of cutting bodices without any seam on the shoulders. By this system the back is cut on the cross and thus a better fit ensured'*⁵³. Dresses were at their most fitted and a smoothly sloping shoulder line was admired. The off-the-shoulder seams were created by cutting the bodice front higher than the bodice back. I have made up this particular pattern and it works remarkably well. (Plates 60 a, b and c) In March 1877 the magazine offered *'our usual coloured panorama of Spring and Summer [which] will be ready at the end of March'*. This was 26 inches by 34 inches and showed over twenty styles; fashion historians are familiar with these large poster-sized fashion plates. It cost 3s from the ubiquitous Mr Miller. In August an advertisement claimed *'A good shaped body for trying on their ladies is a great boon to young dressmakers, first hands and ladies maids'*. These, made up in holland and tacked together, with the seam lines marked up in ink so they could be re-used, were available - from Marie Schild - at 15s for a set of three.

This magazine was also short-lived. In January 1878 it was incorporated into Le Beau Monde -still published by Samuel Miller and edited by Marie Schild, 1s per issue. In April 1879 it became Madame Schild's Monthly Journal of Parisian Dress Patterns. These publications seem to have been intended for a clientele of fashion-conscious ladies rather than for the women who supplied them. On the back of her illustrated catalogue for 1877 (containing 74 black and white illustrations) Mme Schild advertised Le Journal des Modes as *'a monthly magazine by Marie Schild'* at 1s-6d per issue and also The Little Dressmaker at 7d which consisted of patterns and illustrations of children's clothing. Patterns were now being advertised at 1s each. In the back of her second catalogue, for 1877, they were billed as

'The cut-paper pattern of any Design illustrated in this Book, with instructions for making up and quantity of material required, PRICE ONE SHILLING. The Ladies' Patterns are all cut to a Standard - Waist 25 inches and Bust 35 inches; they are also cut to fit, on receipt of own measurements, at an increased charge ---'.

By 1877 Marie Schild had come to an arrangement with Wheeler and Wilson, the sewing machine manufacturers, that they would act as agents for her patterns. For her part, she had an arrangement with Judsons, the dye people, to send out one of their leaflets free with each of her patterns⁵⁴. By 1887 she had changed her allegiance to Singer, and she had established yet another publication Schild's Penny Magazine of Dress and Fashion, 23 pages of cheap paper printed with black and white fashion plates and

⁵³ Drapers' and Milliners' Gazette of Fashion, March and April 1874

⁵⁴ Advertised in all her publications

articles on dress and free paper patterns. Samuel Miller, her publisher, had moved to Southampton Street. In March Mme Schild listed the 100 winners of her free prize draw for a Singer sewing machine and they came from all over the British Isles, from Banff to Felixstowe and from Jersey, Dublin and County Down, demonstrating just how widely her publications were read. The 'gratis' patterns were plain tissue paper shapes, unmarked, and the magazine contained instructions for making them up. The total instructions for making up the Spring jacket offered in May 1887 were as follows:-

'Spring jacket illustrated on the front - No 4028. The correct pattern consists of nine pieces, viz, two fronts, half of vest and back, two side pieces, upper and under parts of sleeve, collar. Quantity of material required, two yards of cloth'.

By 1895 Schild and Miller were involved with yet another publication The Dressmaker's and Milliner's Butterick Quarterly which again concentrated on the supply of paper patterns, presumably under some agreement with the Butterick firm. Again, it is the advertisements that are the most revealing. A 'New Spring Panorama' still cost 3s in 1895, though an annual subscription to the journal included a free panorama for every season. Marie Schild had a whole range of publications on offer - catalogues of dress patterns, catalogues of fancy dress patterns, catalogues of patterns for children and even catalogues of patterns for dolls' clothes.

In 1893 she produced New Skirts and how to cut them, a booklet containing diagrams for cutting the new gored skirts that were becoming popular, and skirts like the 'Loie Fuller' which was a circular skirt, and the 'Bell' skirt which consisted of one pattern piece for what was in effect a half circular skirt. The booklet also gave instructions for what she described as a 'stretched' bodice which relied on using a soft stretchy fabric cut on the cross to produce a close fit. The booklet contained full size tissue patterns for several of the skirts. As with all Marie Schild's books, it advertised her other publications, so we know that by the 1890s she and Samuel Miller were producing four monthly magazines - Le Journal des Modes (32 pages and 6 coloured plates for 1s-6d), Schild's Monthly Journal (black and white fashion plates and needlework patterns, one tissue paper pattern and one coloured plate for 4d), Mother's Help (illustrations of children's dress and one tissue paper pattern for 1d) and Schild's Magazine of Ladies Fashions (24 pages of illustrations and descriptions and a tissue pattern for 1d)⁵⁵.

Her fancy dress costumes are particularly interesting. Fancy dress balls were an important feature of fashionable social life in the late 19th century. The 1881 catalogue contained 1000 illustrations from '---

⁵⁵ Not all Marie Schild's publications survive. The bibliography contains a list of the ones that I have actually been able to see.

the largest collection in the world' which belonged to none other than our old friend, her partner, Samuel Miller. She offered to *'make a paper model of any costume herein described --- and the coloured picture can be bought from Mr Miller'*. Patterns could be cut to fit the buyer's own measurements. Selections of 200-300 plates could be sent to people living in the country and she even had an agent for them in Flinders Lane West, Melbourne, Australia. Judson's advertised in this catalogue, supplying stage gold paint and *'the mysterious skull'* - which glowed in the dark - for private theatricals. A firm called Thornhills supplied jewellery to go with the costumes, while Clarksons supplied the wigs. Debenham and Freebody advertised that they had an arrangement with an artist to supply watercolour sketches of fancy dress or theatrical costume⁵⁶. In Schild's Penny Magazine the fancy dress designs were offered made up into books with titles like Fishwife and Fisher girl and Old English.

The indefatigable Madame Schild also advertised various of her own inventions, including a patent gadget which fitted into the pocket opening and was supposed to deter pickpockets and a *'placket hole closer'* which seems to have been an early form of Velcro. She did accordion pleating - priced by width per yard - presumably on the Wanzer machine. In June 1889 she was offering to pink ladies fabrics in various designs and Samuel Miller was advertising *'silk, plush and velvet cuttings'*⁵⁷. She supplied *'Oxygen Water - a few applications will make the darkest hair a golden hue'*⁵⁸ She also made sure of her future market by offering a 3s-6d doll, which came complete with 15 paper patterns for making up different outfits, including fancy dress, and a series of publications - Dolly as a Baby, Dolly as a Girl and Dolly as a Young Lady (undated). In the early years of this century Mme Schild diversified yet further, producing a books of recipes.⁵⁹

Marie Schild had created a veritable empire which continued to trade into the early years of the 20th century - yet her name is virtually unknown and nothing at all is known about her personally. None of her

⁵⁶ Advertisements for these appear in almost every issue of her publications as well as in the 1881 catalogue

⁵⁷ In Schild's Penny Magazine. The advertisements appear in most issues.

⁵⁸ Advertised in Old English Costumes (undated)

⁵⁹ One Hundred Best Puddings, Creams, Jellies, etc. (1905 and 1908 with an 'improved' edition in 1909) and Schild's Home Cooking (1907).

fashion plates appear in Vyvyan Holland's, James Laver's and Doris Langley Moore's compilations, and she does not feature in any of the major works on 19th century costume⁶⁰.

Madame Adolphe Goubaud and Son produced a trade magazine - The Milliners', Dressmakers' and Warehouseman's Gazette. It was founded in 1870 and in 1881 became The Milliner, Dressmaker and Draper⁶¹. Mme Goubaud appears to have been connected with Goubaud et Cie in Paris, the firm which published Le Moniteur de la Mode, La Modiste Parisienne and La Mode Artistique (for which Gustave Janet drew the fashion plates).

The Milliners' Dressmakers' and Warehouseman's Gazette was published in both Paris (92, Rue de Richelieu) and London (30, Henrietta Street, Covent Garden) as an *'Illustrated journal of the new modes, the coming fashions and latest novelties for wholesale and retail drapers and manufacturers in town and country'*⁶². It contained fashion plates in colour and black and white, descriptions of the outfits they showed, regular features describing the new fashions in Paris, articles by a *'Continental Correspondent'*⁶³ and others describing what was on sale in the Parisian wholesale warehouses - in November 1872, for example, this section gave detailed descriptions of eighteen outfits for women and children, including *'A Black and Plum-Coloured Visiting Toilette'*, a *'Mouse-Coloured Visiting Costume'* and the advice that, this season *'Velvet will be very fashionable --'*. There were short articles on general topics - in 1872-3 there was a series devoted to *'Manchester in the Olden Times'* - and paragraphs about the state of trade and other matters of interest.

The November 1872 issue contained pieces on the numbering of yarns (very detailed and technical), a report on the Committee of Patents (very critical), flowers as a source of inspiration for fabric design (very woolly), a comment on how English women dressed (well), the prospects of the American cotton crop (uncertain) and notes about Cantonese straw plait (cheaper than the English version). The magazine

⁶⁰ Holland, Vyvyan, Hand Coloured Fashion Plates 1770-1899, (1955); Laver, James, Fashion and Fashion Plates. 1800-1900 (1943); op cit, Moore (1971)

⁶¹ Information from the British Library catalogue. No copies of this latter publication appear to survive, and I do not know when it ceased publication.

⁶² Description on the cover of each issue

⁶³ In November 1872 [s]he was in Baden Baden, in January/February 1873 in Paris. By 1879 the feature had disappeared.

appears to have received items for appraisal, and included notes that were effectively advertisements for Debenham and Freebody's new pattern book, Allen and French's hats, Gourdet and Yates' *'Parisian Ornaments'*, Albert crepe, *'Little Rapid'* knitting machines, Thomas Lomas's trade labels, A R Wells and Co's underclothes and waterproof fabrics, Judson's dyes, Messrs Wilson's bonnets, Fisher, Melles, Jones, Reid and Co's artificial flowers and a favourable review of a book by Thomas Brassey MP called Work and Wages. These were followed by more notes about items of interest - bankruptcies (Messrs Shuttleworth of Blackburn and Sutcliffes of Manchester), the Irish flax yield, the Rhode Island Agricultural Society's experiments with *'flax-cotton'*, short-time working in Preston mills, patents for improving cotton velvets, a new method of fastening gaiters, the Vienna exhibition, a patent for an improved *'Purse-Glove'*, improved methods of combing wool, a fan collection in the Dublin Loan Museum, how Chinese silk was processed, cotton manufacturing statistics and a long report on the wool trade, including tables of the export of made goods to Australia and New Zealand. There were also advertisements for trade goods and services and a list of the prices advertisers were charged. These seem exorbitant - a full page advertisement cost £12, though there is no indication of how often the advertisement would appear for that sum. Interestingly, dressmakers' assistants seeking places were charged just 1s for an advertisement of up to 12 words. However, no such advertisements appear in any of the four surviving issues of The Milliners', Dressmakers' and Warehouseman's Gazette.

By 1879, the magazine was thinner, with fewer articles and more advertisements, including ones for Beeton's Ready Reckoner and Gadsden and Wall's *'Special Order Association'* which supplied dress lengths to tradeswomen at reduced rates and by return of post. There was also a full page advertisement for Sylvia's Home Journal and her other publications.

The Goubauds were printers. Mme Goubaud advertised her own range of paper patterns⁶⁴ which could be sent ready made up or adapted to fit individual requirements, and could be despatched to India and the colonies at a cost of 4d or 6d an ounce. She also published a range of handicraft books in the 1860s and 70s, giving instructions for embroidery, lace making, crochet, tatting, knitting and netting⁶⁵.

⁶⁴ These ranged in price from 6d (for a nightcap) to 7s-6d (for an entire layette). See the January 1873 issue.

⁶⁵ There are too many to list. Madame Goubaud's Album of Needlework appeared in 1866 and was followed by twelve other titles before the publication of her last work, Madame Goubaud's Point Lace Book, in 1878.

Another little known entrepreneuse was Annie Tate (nee Philpott). She was an American and in 1882

*'had succeeded in improving and perfecting a ruler (or scale measure). By the aid of this scale the veriest novice in dressmaking can, by measuring with an inch tape the exact size of the figure, draw and cut out different shaped garments --- Such a system of mathematical precision has long been sought for, but had remained unfound until I brought out the "EUREKA" Dresscutter, the 17th March, 1882 ---*⁶⁶

Her system involved the use of a cardboard template with windows which could be adjusted. (Plates 57 a and b) By 1886, she had published her system in book form and ran a dressmaking school at 61, Broad Street, Birmingham⁶⁷. A course of lessons cost 2 guineas, which included copies of her scale and her book. She also provided customised patterns for 1s and 3s-6d and stock patterns for 6d and 1s. Mrs Tate's main preoccupation was with safeguarding her invention.

*'Now that the patent has lapsed, a person in London has rented my old Office in London, and claims to have had my patented Scale registered. Any lawyer will tell you such a thing is not legal ---*⁶⁸

Despite her stress that those attending dressmaking classes should check the teacher's certificate for authenticity and the publication of a spurious sounding letter in The Birmingham Post on August 3rd, 1886 which compared her system favourably with another 'scientific' system being peddled by a Miss Kevan, the essential features of Mrs Tate's invention were soon pirated.

Mrs Dobson was based in the north and her magazine was published by John Heywood in Manchester. Mrs Dobson developed a new system of cutting-out based on a chart of measurements '*-- distinguished from others by its cheapness and the ease with which it is learnt*' and styled herself 'agent for the Scientific Dress Cutting Association'⁶⁹. 'Scientific' had become a buzz word. Science was good - high Victorian Britain prided herself on her modern inventions - and the term was used in all sorts of inappropriate contexts⁷⁰. As dress became more and more fitted and complicated (Plate 62), many measuring systems and books of instruction were produced, most of which relied on mathematical

⁶⁶ Tate, Annie, The "Eureka" Guide to Dressmaking (1886), preface

⁶⁷ Ibid

⁶⁸ Ibid, back cover

⁶⁹ See issues of The Dressmakers' Chart and Cutter

⁷⁰ Godey's Ladies' Magazine published an article in April 1862 on Mme Demorest's 'Science of Dress-Cutting' which seems to be the first use of the term.

formulae to simplify pattern drafting. (Plate 57 c) Mrs Dobson's was one of the more successful. She published a 'magazine' misleadingly entitled The Dressmaker's Chart and Cutter which appeared monthly. The first surviving example dates from June 1888. It consisted of a thin folder containing one coloured fashion plate and two black and white ones; there are various notes printed on the card of the folder, advertising the chart system, advertising for agents for it and advertising other services Mrs Dobson offered. She would cut paper patterns of bodies and sleeves, specially to her client's requirements, for 1s-6d, and she advertised correspondence courses in cutting. By 1889 she had agents in Manchester, Southport, Seacombe, Grange-over-Sands, Barrow-in-Furness, Leek, Preston and Lancaster, her system was taught in numerous schools and she herself was teaching domestic economy at the School of Technical Dressmaking in Preston. In 1890 she moved to the School of Technical Dressmaking in Liverpool. Her magazine increased slightly in size, with a few pages of text, usually articles by her correspondent, Basil Blackett, and the last issues are overprinted with advertisements for Singer sewing machines. After 1890, Mrs Dobson disappears from the record.

Mrs Henry Grenfell taught at the Liverpool training school of 'Household Sewing with Home Dress Cutting'. She fits into this section rather than the next because of the range of her publications. Her best selling work was probably Dress Cutting-out: pupil's manual for home study of 1892.

*'This little manual is intended to help pupils of elementary dresscutting classes in their home preparation between the lessons. The need of it has been urgently pressed on me by the teachers of these classes ---'*⁷¹.

By the 1890s dressmaking, and especially cutting out, were being taught in a range of institutions. Mrs Grenfell claimed that it was a 'modern' idea in England that these skills could be taught. In fact by this date there was a shortage of properly trained dressmakers. Apprentices learnt to sew, but cutting out was the jealously-guarded preserve of forewomen and principals, so classes were introduced to remedy this shortfall. Suitable education for women was also becoming a preoccupation, and Mrs Grenfell capitalised on what she called *'The sudden and widespread demand for Technical Education for Women in the Domestic Sciences ---'*⁷²

Her booklet cost 1d. It gave instructions for pattern drafting and cutting, much on the lines of many of the manuals discussed in the next section. It earned its educational status, however, by the question-and-

⁷¹ Op cit, Grenfell (1892), preface

⁷² Ibid

answer format at the end of each chapter. Without the manual and an understanding of Mrs Grenfell's system the questions are impenetrable. On the sleeve, for example (p.15), the questions began '*What is the distance of E from C? Is E to F the full measure of the inner seam? Where is G put? How is the inner seam line ruled? How is the sharp corner at G rounded?---*'.

This booklet ran to several editions and was followed by Dressmaking: a technical manual for teachers (1892) which was also published in New York, Under-linen cutting out, pupils' manual for home study (1894) and The Teacher of Dressmaking Ne Plus Ultra (undated) which gave '*the fullest instructions in improved Scientific Measuring, Fitting and Cutting-out in Dressmaking ---*'. Mrs Grenfell's system spread beyond Liverpool '*thoroughly trained teachers have carried it over many parts of the country*' because it was '*most suitable for the working women and girls who flocked to --- classes*' according to her principal, Fanny Calder⁷³.

Even ordinary workers could capitalise on their talent. Meyer and Black in 1909 reported on how some home workers '*make designs of their own and take them to show to firms in the hope of getting an order to make so many dozen copies*'. While firms did not pay well, and some certainly pirated the designs they were shown, no doubt some women profited⁷⁴.

Measuring systems and dressmaking manuals

Mrs Dobson and Mrs Grenfell were not unique. As the 19th century progressed, dresses became more and more fitted. Sized patterns simplified cutting, but for a dress to fit really snugly, that pattern had to be adapted to the customer's measurements. Throughout the latter part of the 19th century numerous books purported to offer 'new systems' of dressmaking. On examination, most of them turn out to be new ways of calculating measurements.

Some businesses created their own measuring systems. As early as 1829, J Kinzett, tailor and ladies' habit and pelisse maker '*from London*', advertised '*cutting on an entirely new principle which saves the trouble of alterations*'⁷⁵. Mr Clarke of Bourn seems to have trained at the Tailor and Cutter Academy in London, and the brochure that survives amongst his papers gives the Tailor and Cutter 'system' for

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ Op cit, Meyer and Black, (1909) pp.73-4

⁷⁵ The Leicestershire Herald and General Advertiser, May 20th, 1829

measuring - basically the order in which the measurements should be taken. Clarke's order book survives - just names followed by a list of figures which obviously corresponded to measurements of parts of the body - but they do not correspond to the list in the brochure⁷⁶ (Plates 22 and 23). Dallas and Company of Cowcaddens, Glasgow, did both millinery and dressmaking in the 1880s, and this firm also developed its own measuring chart⁷⁷. (Plate 61)

There had been dressmaking manuals in the first half of the century that tried to teach new processes. G Walker's The Art of Cutting Ladies Riding habits, etc was in its 7th edition by 1838. Walker was a tailor and had produced various works on tailoring, including Walker's Tables of quantities, positions for dress coats, great coats, etc or The Tailors' Ready Assistant (1834) and The Tailor's Masterpiece (1835), and lectured on tailoring at the London Mechanic's Institute. The riding habit book consists of directions for measuring, pattern drawing and taking proportions and diagrams of pattern pieces and cutting layouts. The fluctuating size of women's sleeves of the 1820s and 1830s had apparently caused tailors some problems. Tailors were not as used to learning new techniques as dressmakers had to be.

The Young Woman's Guide (containing correct rules for the pursuits of Millinery, Dress and Corset making) was written by Mrs Thomas Willimott in 1841. Mrs Willimott had her own agenda, which was to establish a General Domestic Female Institution for girls over the age of 14. She solicited donations from her readers, and appealed for information about suitable premises in London. She planned to teach millinery, dress, straw bonnet and stay making, embroidery, plain work, artificial flower making, laundry, cooking, confectionary, household work and nursery work. It seems unlikely that there was a need for such an establishment, and Mrs Willimott did not give any reason why she thought a course of instruction there would be preferable to a craft apprenticeship or on-the-job training. Presumably it was purely a commercial venture. Had it succeeded, Mrs Willimott would be being considered in the previous section alongside Marie Schild and Mrs Dobson.

Her book was didactic, offering instructions to mothers, boarding house keepers, women of business and various categories of female servants, and providing recipes and instructions for various household activities like French polishing tables and curing hams. The bulk of the book was given over to 'lessons' on millinery, dress and stay making, and it contained a number of un-labelled fold out patterns, presented

⁷⁶ Cambs RO R82/102

⁷⁷ University of Glasgow Business Records Centre, HF51

without any allowance for seams. The instructions that accompanied them were ill written and confusing - for example 'Rule 2 (for measuring and making a toile, p.8)

'--- Cut half a back and sidepiece in one, quite high, the selvage up the middle; also half a front, the selvage up the centre; (take the dress off) place a tape round the throat, merely to pin the top of the front and back to (invariably take the right side); begin by pinning the lining down the middle of the back, then across the blade bone and under the arm (don't spare pins) Take the front and do likewise -'

The novice dressmaker was unlikely to be much the wiser. Mrs Willimott charged 10s-6d for each of her 'lessons' and also offered '*A Lady's measure taken and lined out in plans for her own use - £1-1s*'. As having a complete dress made cost around 5s, it is unlikely Mrs Willimott had many takers⁷⁸.

Mrs Howell's The Handbook of Dressmaking (1845) was intended for professionals.

*'No young lady that is apprenticed, or about to be apprenticed to dress-making, should be without this faithful guide, since here are displayed all the paramount features connected with the art. The information here contained will serve to educate the greatest novice in the theory of the business, allowing the practice to follow. Again, no work-room should be without a copy, since it will save the principal much time and fatigue in giving various directions'*⁷⁹.

The book is clear and reasonably easy to follow and lays great stress on accuracy and attention to detail. Unlike some writers, Mrs Howell knew her job.

The number of manuals and pamphlets and magazines increased rapidly after 1870. Many of their authors, like Mrs Dobson, were seduced by the idea of 'scientific' systems which created formulae by which measurements could be calculated. 'Myra', editress of Myra's Journal of Dress and Fashion, Myra's Half-Yearly Budget of Paris Fashions and Myra's Journal of Dress and Needlework produced a series of booklets of '*Dressmaking Lessons*' in 1877, and these were re-vamped and re-issued in 1887. She laid great stress on measuring and supplied diagrams of exactly how this should be done. Her instructions are fairly basic, with illustrations of how to do straightforward processes like gathering, sewing different types of seams and piping buttonholes. 'Myra' was associated with the Weldon pattern company - her booklets were available from them.

⁷⁸ Willimott, Mrs T, The Young Woman's Guide (1841) p.13

⁷⁹ Howell, Mrs, The Handbook of Dressmaking (1845) preface

Mademoiselle Grandhomme's Cutting Out and Dressmaking (1879), translated from the French, advocated a confusing system of fixed, variable and verifying measures, also based on 'scientific' principles. Mrs Lowther Knight's 'European' System of Dresscutting by Measure contained a '*skirt scale*' for working out the width of panels in relation to the waist measurement; E G Kendall's Instructions for the Cosmopolitan System of Dressmaking (1892) advised making cardboard charts '*shewing the actual proportions for various measures taken*' and boasted that '*The calculations being so accurately worked out by the inventor that a misfit is quite impossible --*'⁸⁰ M A Laughton's Dressmaking: Guide to Freehand (1897) showed how to plot patterns on a grid; A Clarke's Simple Instructions in Dresscutting by Tailors' Measures also concentrated on pattern drawing.

Mrs J Bellhouse's Be Your Own Dressmaker included what she called '*tres facile*' methods of cutting out skirts. For example, to cut out the 'Cornet' skirt, she recommended -

*'Take four lengths of lining, join them, measure across the bottom 60 inches, tear this off. Fold it in two, and across from the fold measure 15 inches for the top and gore for the 15 to the edge of the lining. Now you will find your gored edge is longer than the fold, pare this extra length off and then take your remaining length of lining, fold it in half and cut exactly like the first one --'*⁸¹

The fabric of the skirt proper was to be treated in the same way. Her diagrams did nothing to clarify the instructions. One wonders what Mrs Bellhouse's definition of '*tres difficile*' would have been.

Mrs Lowther Knight's pamphlet How to Make a Dress from the European System of Dresscutting (1896) gave instructions for making '*European perfect-fitting bodices*' and '*Alpha skirts*' (from Mme Knight's Alpha skirt scale). Mrs (or Mme) Knight was the founder and principal of the Royal Counties Cutting College in Reading, which opened in September 1889 and was under the patronage of HRH Princess Christian. Florence White published Easy Dressmaking (1892), a manual for teachers of dressmaking with fold-out charts and instructions for enlarging and adapting patterns. Tomlin's Dressmakers Guide: cutting made easy an '*entirely new and original Tailor's system --*'⁸² also appeared in the 1890s.

⁸⁰ Kendall, E G, Instructions for the Cosmopolitan System of Dressmaking (1892) p.3

⁸¹ Bellhouse, Mrs J, Be your own Dressmaker (1893) [no page numbers]

⁸² Tomlin, J, Tomlin's Dressmakers Guide. cutting made easy (1890s) preface

Mrs Woodgate Low's Technical and Practical Lessons in Dressmaking 'for Ladies wishing to perfect themselves in Home Dressmaking' was published in 1893. Mrs Low recommended Butterick patterns and Singer sewing machines. She was 'an experienced teacher', and her instructions, though basic, are clear and sensible, interspersed with household hints about lining collars (use the silk from old umbrellas), cleaning black lace (sal volatile and old newspapers) and getting grease out of velvet (use salad oil)⁸³. Two other teachers, Mrs H M Ashworth of Halifax and Miss C J B Sykes of Burnley produced the ABC Method of Dresscutting for Use in Technical Schools in 1894. Mrs Balhatchet's Dress Cutting and Making on Tailor's Principles, Mme Levine's The Rodmure System of Dress Cutting. Geometrical and Practical and Miss Banks's System Self Teaching Dress Cutting all came out in the 1890s and all attempted to show the best way of creating the smart, tailored look of the last decade of the 19th century.

Probably the best and most usable of all these many manuals were R Monroe's Practical Dressmaking of 1879 and The Elements of Modern Dressmaking (1894) by Jeanette E Davis, principal of the 'Women's Work' department at Manchester Municipal Technical School.

Monroe's instructions were very detailed even though she purported to be writing for ladies. She devoted a whole chapter to adapting patterns '*Fitting on and rectifying imperfect fits*'. For example, she described how best to alter a pattern that was an inch too tight at the bust. Rather than simply cutting the pattern piece a little larger at that point, she explained how

*'the alteration would be made by turning out the hem an inch wider at the waist and a quarter inch at the neck, sloping it out from one point to the other, not in a sudden slanting line, but letting it be more sudden from the neck to the chest and thence almost straight to the waist. As the waist is to remain the same size, the additional inch is used by giving one half to each of the bosom darts, which are also shifted a trifle more forward in order to preserve the same general appearance. The half inch in each dart of course causes greater spring above them, and compensates for not having quite the full inch in the hem at the chest'*⁸⁴.

I have tried it and it works perfectly.

Dresses of the 1870s fitted smoothly, and Ms Monroe was full of tips for avoiding wrinkling. It was essential that, regardless of the shape of the bodice, the actual waistline should be cut on the straight of

⁸³ Low, Mrs Woodgate, Technical and Practical Lessons in Dressmaking (1893) introduction

⁸⁴ Op cit, Monroe (1879) p.9

the fabric. Side pieces should be eased into the back rather than vice versa. Good paper patterns *'notably the American ones, have the back shoulder half an inch longer than the front; this is no error, and has more to do with a smooth, unwrinkled fit than many would believe'*. Even the two front darts could make a bodice look bulky if the maker failed *'to draw down the piece - rather straining it, in fact, when sewing it to its adjacent side'*⁸⁵. Skirt seams should always be stitched from top to bottom so that any unevenness was lost at the hem.

She devoted a whole chapter to mourning. *'One point cannot be too strongly impressed - it is that no sewing must be visible'*⁸⁶. Even top stitching by machine was decorative and therefore unacceptable. Similarly *'crepe plisses'* (frills of pleating) were too elaborate and were *'rarely placed on the best class of mourning'*⁸⁷. She was extremely fussy. *'It looks very ill if [the grain] of the tucks slants from right to left, and that of the headings from left to right'*⁸⁸ and very knowledgeable:-

*'Paramatta is too weak, unless lined, to stand heavy crepe trimming. Black mull muslin, about 6d a yard, is substantial enough, but should never be omitted, or the dress will split wherever a strain is given by the weight of the crepe.'*⁸⁹

A whole chapter was devoted to different sorts of trimmings - puffings, kiltings, single box pleats, double box pleats, triple and quadruple pleats, feather ruches, single gathered ruches, fluted ruches, fluted flounces, single French hems, double French hems, narrow silk bindings, wide silk or velvet bindings, crossway bands, shell quilling, plain quilling, leaf trimming, upright puffs, twisted ruches, gatherings and frillings, braiding, fringing, bows and sashes, gauging, quilting and false buttonholes. Each merited a paragraph, some a page or two, of description.

Yet another chapter was devoted to the right linings for different fabrics, and again Ms Monroe was incredibly thorough. Cotton gowns should have a plain, deep hem, but longer skirts should have a facing *'laid inside with the coloured side outwards, to look like an upturned hem'*. Velvet should be lined with sarsnet over Victoria lawn, and

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.11

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.49

⁸⁷ Ibid, p.50

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.50

⁸⁹ Ibid, p.52

*'leno is preferable to book muslin for lining between two other materials, such as to crossway bands or other flat trimmings, but bulges too much when unprotected by a backing; and though it will serve for narrow poor silk plisses, is too yielding for lining most folded trimmings, such as fluted ruches; book muslin being the better then'*⁹⁰.

It is difficult to believe that Ms Monroe was really writing for amateurs.

The Elements of Modern Dressmaking by Jeanette Davis was intended for use by professional dressmakers and their staffs and also taught dressmaking to a level at which students could sit the London City and Guilds' examination. Miss Davis also knew her business thoroughly. She was scathing about the new systems of cutting out which supposedly did away with the need for trying on. She devoted a whole chapter to buttons and buttonholes and a large section to the merits of different types of bones; she described how to recognise and fit different figures, how to correct mistakes and how to remove wrinkles, and gave detailed instructions for methods of machining and cutting out different types of fabrics. For example:-

*'When cutting out good woollen stuffs, the scissors should be kept slightly outside the margins of the linings, as such stuffs draw up slightly under the scissors as they are being cut, and some small allowance should be made for this'*⁹¹.

She explained how to finish seams and considered raw edges '*very common work indeed*'. It was, she thought, best to bind seams with ribbon, and if curves had to be cut to make them lie flat '*Snipped curves do not look well - scallops should be used if cutting is needed*'⁹². Tightly fitted sleeves presented enormous problems. Miss Davis explained that they should be stitched in two sections - down from the armhole to the elbow, and up from the wrist to the elbow, leaving a '*tiny bag*'. '*If the seam is joined down the back seam, from top to bottom, there will be no elbow, and it will not lie flat, but will twist from inside to outside in a very ugly way --*'⁹³ She did not confine herself to descriptions of current practice but described techniques used in the past and the reasons for them (see chapter six). Miss Davis clearly had many years of experience under her belt. Her book is still a mine of useful information.

⁹⁰ Ibid, for all the quotations about linings, p.54

⁹¹ Op cit, Davis, (1894), pp.6-7

⁹² Ibid, p.32

⁹³ Ibid p.23

There were also a number of new dressmaking magazines. Marie Schild's publications have already been described. The Tailor and Cutter's Academy published The Ladies' Tailor, a magazine which began in 1884 and gave instructions and patterns for ladies' tailored wear. Weldon, the pattern firm, published monthly titles aimed at different parts of the market - Weldon's Ladies Journal at 3d, Weldon's Dressmaker at 1d, Weldon's Bazaar at 1d and Weldon's Needlework at 2d. The Dressmaker and Milliner had a brief run from March 1895 to November 1896.

Conclusion

Advances in technology created new machines, and new fabrics like crepe and elastic. Publishers and printers found the market eager for as many fashion plates, patterns, magazines and manuals as they could produce. Victorian entrepreneurs had found yet another arena in which to make money. What is interesting here, however, is how many of these entrepreneurs were women. Of course, the inventions discussed in this chapter benefited the domestic needlewoman as well as the professional, and many of them were marketed to target the home dressmaker. There is no way of knowing what percentage of the market was domestic, but undoubtedly there were women who did make their own clothes. However, it is with the professional dressmaker that we are concerned here.

A number of factors had combined to change the dressmaking trade in the final third of the 19th century. There was demographic change. The population became larger and more bourgeois. Society decreed that respectable women should change their dress to suit different activities and different times of day - ball gowns were different from dinner gowns; afternoon dresses were different from morning dresses, and different again from walking outfits; special clothes in special fabrics were deemed appropriate for seaside wear; dress for different stages of mourning was carefully tabulated. Numerous women's magazines disseminated information about the changing forms and etiquette of fashion, which were followed even in the rural districts of Cornwall or the wilds of the Lake District. Shops - particularly clothiers and drapers - grew larger to serve their increasing clienteles.

The size of a dressmaker's client base, and the amount each individual spent per year, is as good a measure of potential profit as an analysis of the prices of garments or numbers of transactions. A detailed analysis of the expenditure pattern of four customers' appears in appendices one and two. In chapter six we will look at how fashion writers advised ladies to spend their money and at the garments dressmakers made for some of them.

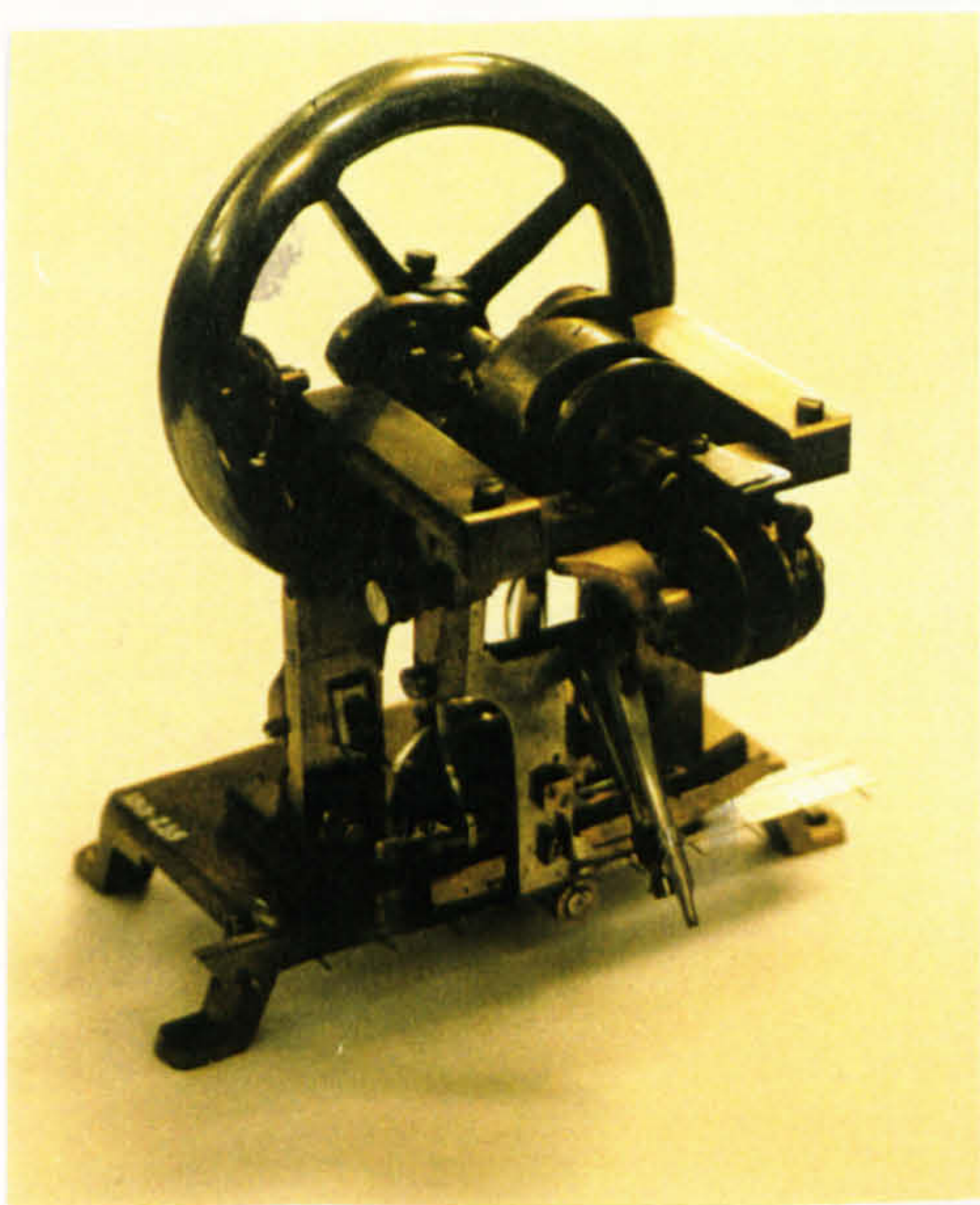
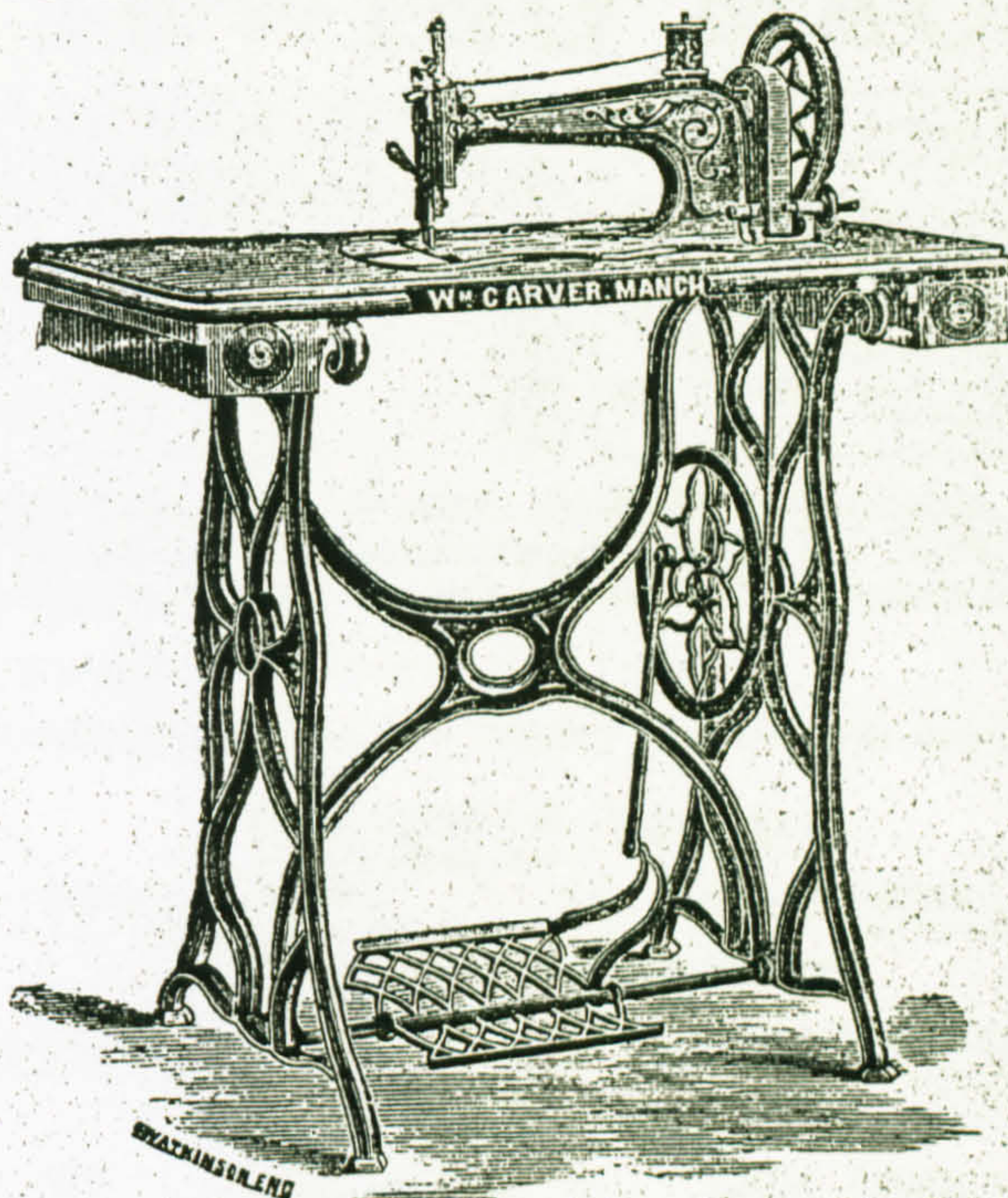


Plate 39.

Elias Howe machine number 3. This was one of the machines Howe used while working for the corset manufacturer, Thomas, in 1847-9. Thomas presented the machine to the Science Museum. The spoked baster plate can be seen at the front. The machine measures 9 ins x 9 ins x 9 3/4 ins high. It has recently been restored.

WM. CARVER'S CELEBRATED MEDIUM MACHINE.



Will Hem, Fell, Gather, Tuck, Seam, &c., and is adapted to sew from the finest muslin to thick cloth.

ON POLISHED TABLE, £7 10s.

Work and Showrooms—PARK ST., CORPORATION ST., MANCHESTER.

Plate 40. (top right) Advertisement from the *Drapers' and Milliners' Gazette of Fashion*, 1873 for William Carver's sewing machine. Like Wright and Mann's *Excelsior* machine (see p.194) its maker claimed it was capable of performing a wide range of processes

Plate 41 (below) Advertisement for late Elias Howe sewing machines from the *Brighton Courier of Fashion*, 1871.

ELIAS HOWE SEWING MACHINES,

SPECIALLY ADAPTED FOR

THE HOWE MACHINE

Is universally acknowledged
to be the Best,

FOR LADIES' WORK OF



LADIES AND DRESSMAKERS.

THE HOWE MACHINE

Possesses all the Newest
Improvements.

EVERY DESCRIPTION.

The HOWE MACHINES are unrivalled; they will STITCH, QUILT, GATHER, HEM, FELL, CORD, BRAID, BIND, and EMBROIDER. For Ladies they are invaluable. Dressmakers, and others engaged in the manufacture of various articles of Dress will find the HOWE MACHINE possesses vast superiority over all others.

The HOWE MACHINES at the Vienna Exhibition, 1873, gained the Grand Medal of Progress, the Grand Medal of Merit, and Three Medals were awarded to Employes for the beauty and excellence of their work.

PROSPECTUS, SPECIMENS OF WORK, AND "HISTORY OF THE SEWING MACHINE," SENT POST FREE.

BRANCH OFFICES, { LIVERPOOL—67, Bold-street. BRISTOL—33, High-street. GLASGOW—60, Buchanan-street. DUNDEE—34, Bank-street.
MANCHESTER—22, Oldham-street. LEICESTER—33, High-street. NORWICH—31, London-street. ABERDEEN—Bridge-street.
NEWCASTLE—Grainger-street West. DUBLIN—33, Lower Sackville-st. SWANSEA—Oxford-street. BLACKBURN—22, Darwen-street.
BIRMINGHAM—Masonic-bldgs., New-st. HULL—45, Whitefriargate. EDINBURGH—18, Cockburn-street. NORTHAMPTON—27, Sheep-st.

LONDON: 150, CHEAPSIDE, AND 135, REGENT STREET, W.

Silent Feed and Straight
Needle.

SINGER'S

Lock-Stitch and
Embroidery.

NEW FAMILY SEWING MACHINE

SEWS the Lock-Stitch, makes Embroidery, and is the Easiest to Learn.

IS the Easiest to Work, and Sews the Greatest Variety of Fabrics.

ON HIRE, with OPTION of PURCHASE, BY SMALL WEEKLY OR MONTHLY PAYMENTS.

Instruction given, Without Charge, to all whether Purchasers or not.

THE paramount excellence and extended popularity of the SINGER COMPANY'S Machines is incontestably proved by the sworn returns of sales made by the leading manufacturers DURING THE YEAR 1870 which are as follows:

Machines sold.	
THE SINGER MANUFACTURING COMPANY	127,833
Wheeler and Wilson Co.	83,208
Howe Co.	75,156
Grover and Baker Co.	57,402
Weed Co.	35,002
Willcox and Gibbs Co.	28,890
Florence Co.	17,660

IS unequalled for Strength and Beauty of Stitch, and the highest approved for the Family, the Seamstress, and Dressmaker.

IS the most complete for every variety of Family Sewing, Braiding, and Embroidery.

ON HIRE, with OPTION of PURCHASE, BY SMALL WEEKLY OR MONTHLY PAYMENTS.

Instruction given, Without Charge, to all whether Purchasers or not.

THE superiority of the SINGER COMPANY'S MACHINES for beauty of stitch, simplicity of mechanism, and adaptability to every class of sewing, has been established in fair and open competitions in actual sewing contests, and the PUBLIC RECOGNITION of its merits is to be found in the numerous awards of First Prizes over every competitor at nearly all the various Industrial Exhibitions in America and in Europe.

THE following Industrial Societies in England have honoured THE SINGER COMPANY'S NEW FAMILY MACHINE with their FIRST PRIZES, since July 27th, 1871:—

BLACKBURN SILVER MEDAL	Royal South Lancashire Agricultural Society's Show, July 27th.	BIRKENHEAD SILVER MEDAL	Wirrall Agricultural Society's Show, August 30th.	TODMORDEN CASH PRIZE	Todmorden Agricultural Society's Show, September 2nd.
ORMSKIRK SILVER MEDAL	Southport and Ormskirk Agricultural Society's Show, Aug. 10th and 11th.	LEIGH SILVER MEDAL	Leigh Agricultural Society's Show, August 31st.	NORTHWICH SILVER MEDAL	Northwich Agricultural Society's Show, September 25th.
PRESTON DIPLOMA	Preston Agricultural Society's Show, August 17th.	LIVERPOOL SILVER CUP	Manchester and Liverpool Agricultural Society's Show, September 5th, 6th, & 7th.	MIDDLETON CASH PRIZE	Middleton Agricultural Society's Show, September 20th.
ROCHDALE CASH PRIZE	Rochdale Agricultural Society's Show, August 23rd.	FIRST GRAND PRIZE, SILVER CUP, specially given for the Machine best adapted for domestic purposes; and a SILVER MEDAL for the simplicity of its Mechanism.		FARNWORTH SILVER MEDAL	Farnworth Agricultural Society's Show, Farnworth, October 5th.

ILLUSTRATED PRICE LIST SENT POST FREE.

HAND OR (PRICE FROM) TREADLE

£6 10s.

CHIEF OFFICE IN EUROPE:
147, CHEAPSIDE, LONDON.

BRANCH DEPOTS.

SOUTH LONDON	8, Newington Causeway
LIVERPOOL	21, Bold Street
MANCHESTER	105, Market Street
BRISTOL	19, High Street
NEWCASTLE	Grainger Street West
LEEDS	Boar Lane
NORWICH	4, Orford Hill
SWANSEA	108, Oxford Street

BRANCH DEPOTS.

GLASGOW	65, Buchanan Street
EDINBURGH	108, Princes Street
DUNDEE	49, Reform Street
ABERDEEN	46, George Street
INVERNESS	3, Drummond Street
DUBLIN	69, Grafton Street
BELFAST	4, Donegal Square North
PLYMOUTH	2, Union Street

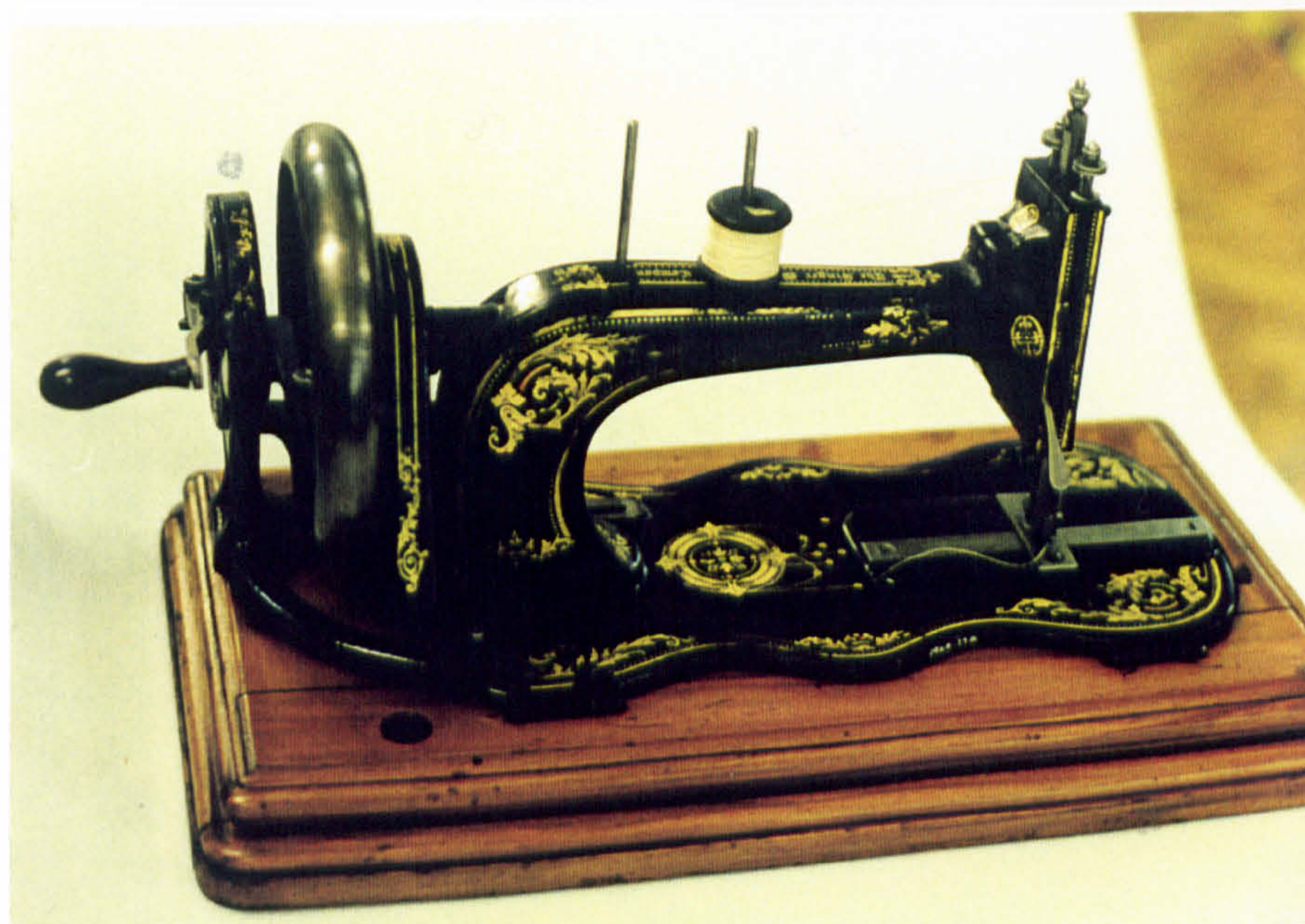


Plate 42

Advertisement for Singer sewing machines from the Brighton Courier of Fashion, 1871.

Plate 43

Singer's New Family sewing machine, produced from 1865 to 1885. It was originally priced at £4-4s. The machine is still quite small - the height under the arch is just 3 ½ ins at its highest point - which must have made it difficult to manipulate when sewing full skirts, for example.

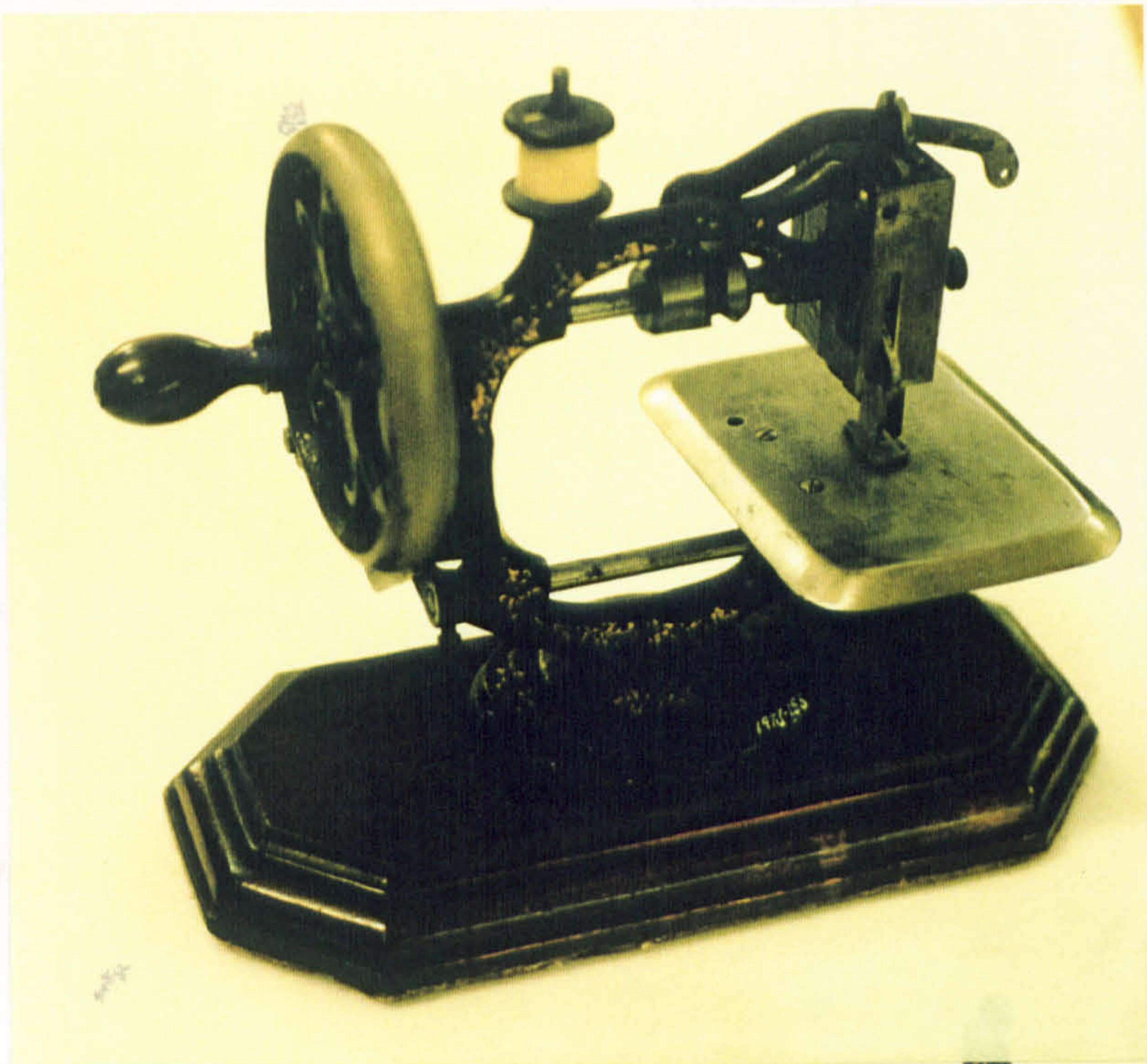


Plate 44.

Hand machine by Philip Diehl, c.1878
The base is 13 3/4 ins x 5ins and it is 8 1/2 ins high at its highest point

Plates 45 a and b

Two highly decorated Jones machines of the 1890s. The one on the right was first made in 1879 and retailed at £4-4s. It was known as the HIB (hand iron base) and was a popular export model



The machine on the left bears decoration that is very similar to that found on early typewriters. They, too, were machines aimed at the female market.





Plate 46.

Singer sewing machine with buttonhole attachment, c.1888. The buttonhole is cut by a die attached to a hammer (visible at the back of the machine). The hole is sewn around by a needle attached to a cam plate to the same size and shape as the hole.

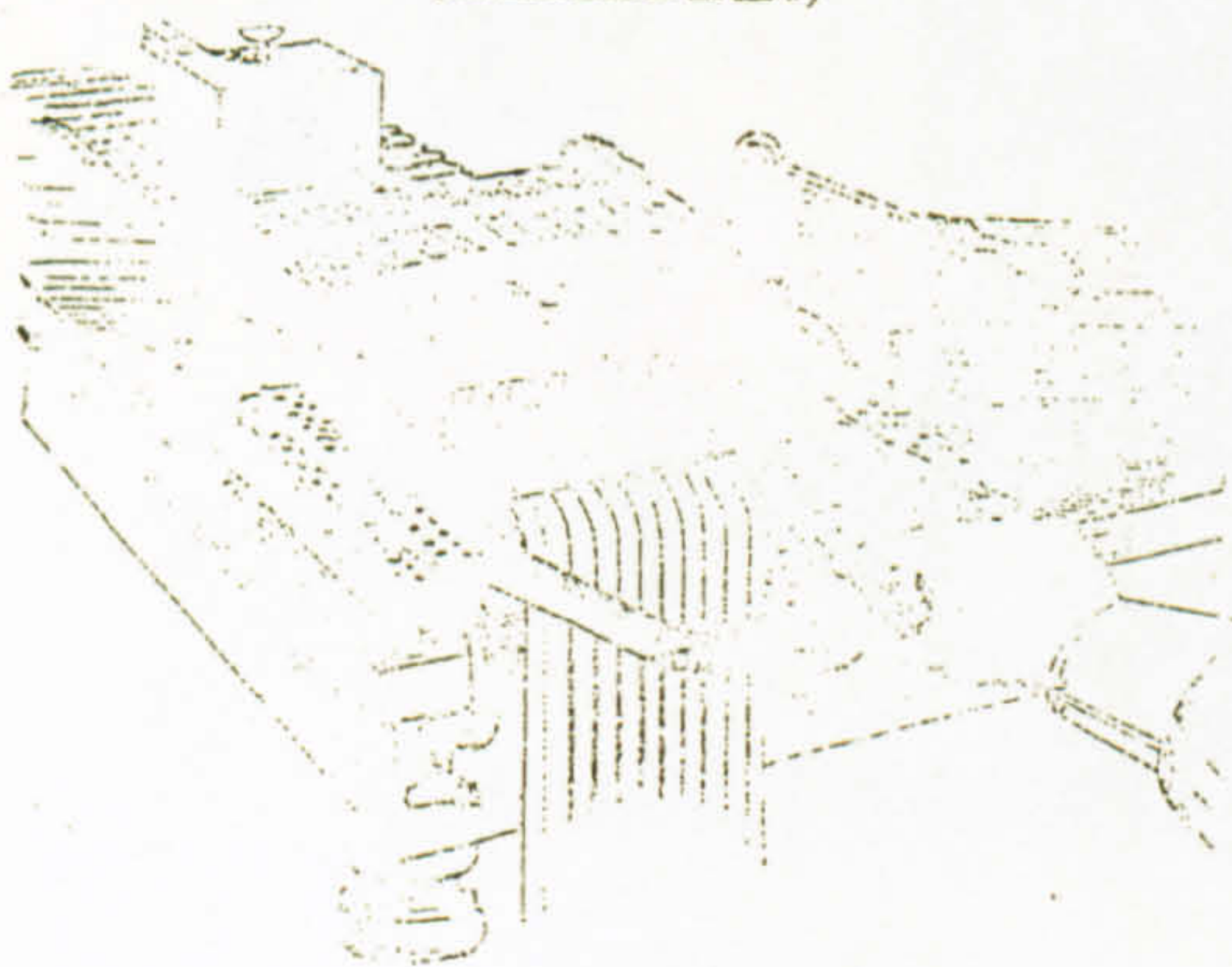


Plate 47.

Bodice of the dress made for Clara Dare of Leicester by a visiting dressmaker with a sewing machine, sometime in the 1860s. Miss Dare disliked the dress and scarcely wore it.

THE SEWING MACHINE GAZETTE AND JOURNAL OF DOMESTIC APPLIANCES. (July 1879.)
THE WANZER SEWING MACHINE CO.,
 (LIMITED)

THE WANZER



PLAITING MACHINE

Introduced by THE WANZER SEWING MACHINE COMPANY, but closely imitated in appearance by other makers, is the only practical HAND KILTER. 5,000 sold in a few weeks.
 SIX INCHES WIDE, 33s. TEN INCHES WIDE, 60s.
 Each Machine working two varieties of beautiful Kilting or Plaiting.

Fricker's Patent Plaiting Machine.

WILL PLAIT THE FINEST MUSLIN OR LASS TWENTY PLEATS TO THE INCH.
 Sole Patentees of the Silsby Darning and Mending Machine, Ritting, Pressing and Basting at one operation.

THE WANZER LOCK-STITCH HAND OR FOOT SEWING MACHINES.

The NEW "LITTLE WANZER," Entirely new, patented and Improved. 1. Nickel Plated, Lower Wheel, 2. Patent Shuttle. Take up Lever & Spooler, £14s. 0d.
 WANZER "A," Smaller model. The most powerful yet made, running Hand Machine, straight run, £14s. 0d.
 WANZER "F," Family Machine, with reversible of a and stitch lever, £7 10s. 0d.
 Price List and Prospectus Free.

WANZER SEWING MACHINE CO.,
 Paris-131, Boulevard Sebastopol. (Metzger & Co West Nile Street.
 Leeds-6, New Bridgegate. Edinburgh-47, Bold Street.
 LONDON OFFICE, 6, GREAT PORTLAND STREET, LONDON, W.

Plate 48.

Advertisements in The Sewing Machine Gazette and Journal of Domestic Appliances, July 1879, for the Wanzer and Fricker plaiting (otherwise known as kilting) machines. The illustration of the Wanzer machine is very indistinct, but the machine would appear to be about the size of a typewriter and the fabric seems to have threaded into the slots at the front and been clamped tight by pulling the lever.



1711^e

N°22 - 1880

10, Boulevard des Capucines Paris

LE MONITEUR DE LA MODE

Paris, Rue du Quatre Septembre, N°3.

Plate 49. Fashion plate from Le Moniteur de la Mode, 1880, showing numerous examples of kilting on women's and children's garments.

Only Fashionable

See New Price List.

French Shapes to be had in England.

Up-to-Date Drapers Please Note!!!

Expands to Fit all Figures.



No. 90.
Medium Hip, 6 in. from
Waist, 15 9.
Full Hip, 10 in. from
Waist, 18.



No. 110.
Costume Stand, with full
Arms and Papier Mache
Head, 43 6.
Ditto, with Wax Head, 1st
Quality, Eyes & Complexion
to order, 79 6.



Folds in 25-In. Box.
Expands from 20 to 30 Waist.
Do. 84 to 40 Bust.
Best Expanding Stand ever
invented. In Box, 35/.



No. 22.
Medium Hip, on
Jersey Stand, 9/9.



No. 16.
Special Shape Corset
Bust Plain Cover,
Stock Size, on Stand
to telescope, 9 9.



No. 1.—With
Short Hip (3 in.
from Waist), to
hang or stand on
Counter, 5 6.

Send for New Price List.
Illustrated.

New Patent
CLOCKWORK BUST.



Corset, or Jersey Bust, with
Patent Clockwork to revolve
eight hours per winding. Com-
plete, 35.

Grandest thing in the market
for pushing Leading Lines and
60 per cent. under anything
similar.
Show Cases Extra.

Up-to-Date
Drapers
Please Note.

THE
**FRENCH
BUST COMPANY,**
254, Tottenham Court Road.

Plate 50. Advertisement for lay figures from The Drapers' Record (1895)

Plate 51. Punch cartoon of 1893. The caption reads 'CRUELLE ENIGME The Problem of the Day: How to get this year's sleeves into last year's jacket'. By 1893, lay figures were commonplace.





Plate 52. (Above) The mantua maker or ladies' dressmaker fitting a client, from The Book of English Trades, 1823. She would have used the 'pin to fit' method.



Plate 53. (Right) Frontispiece from The Workwoman's Guide of 1838 showing a rather idealised picture of a sewing lesson in a village school.

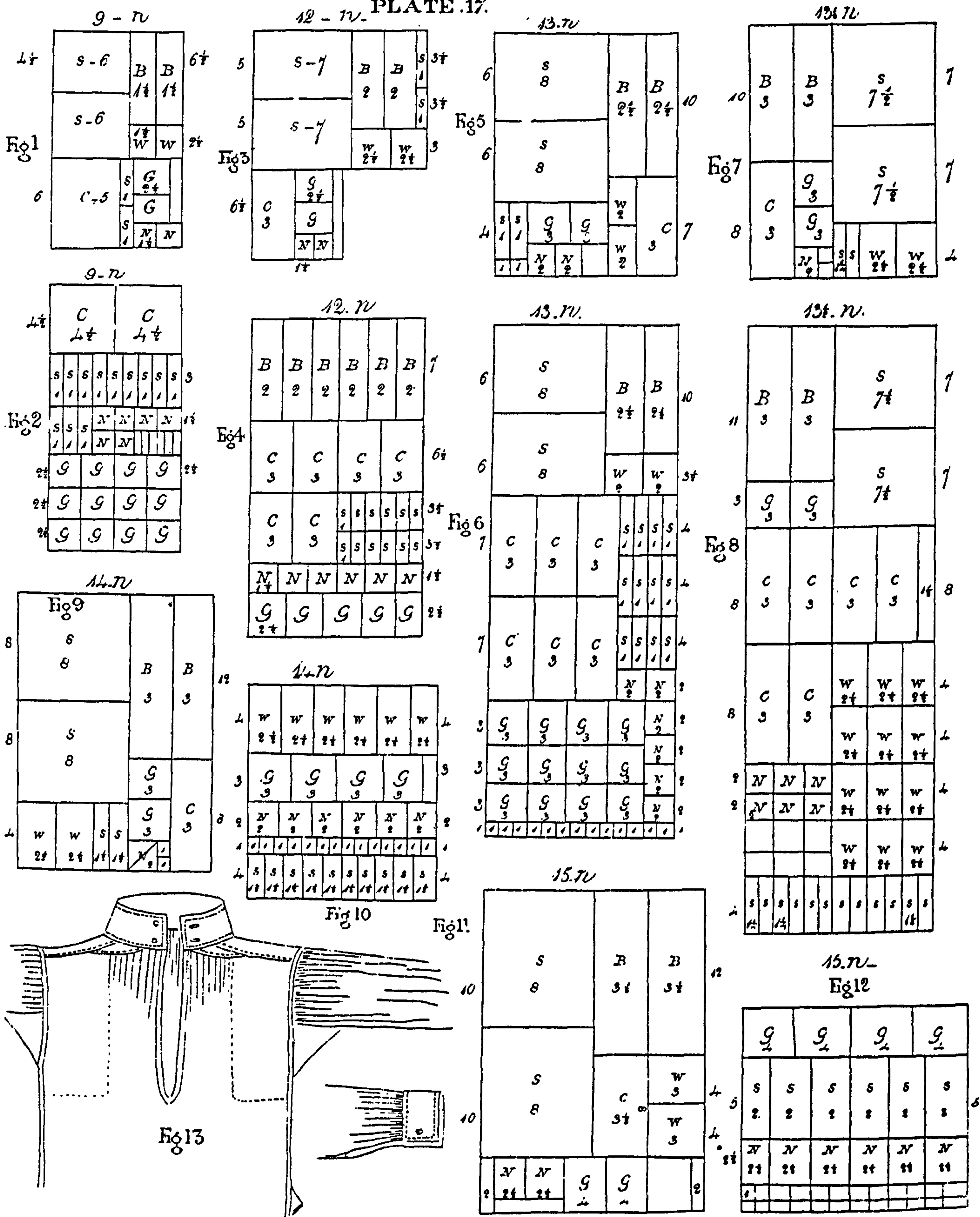
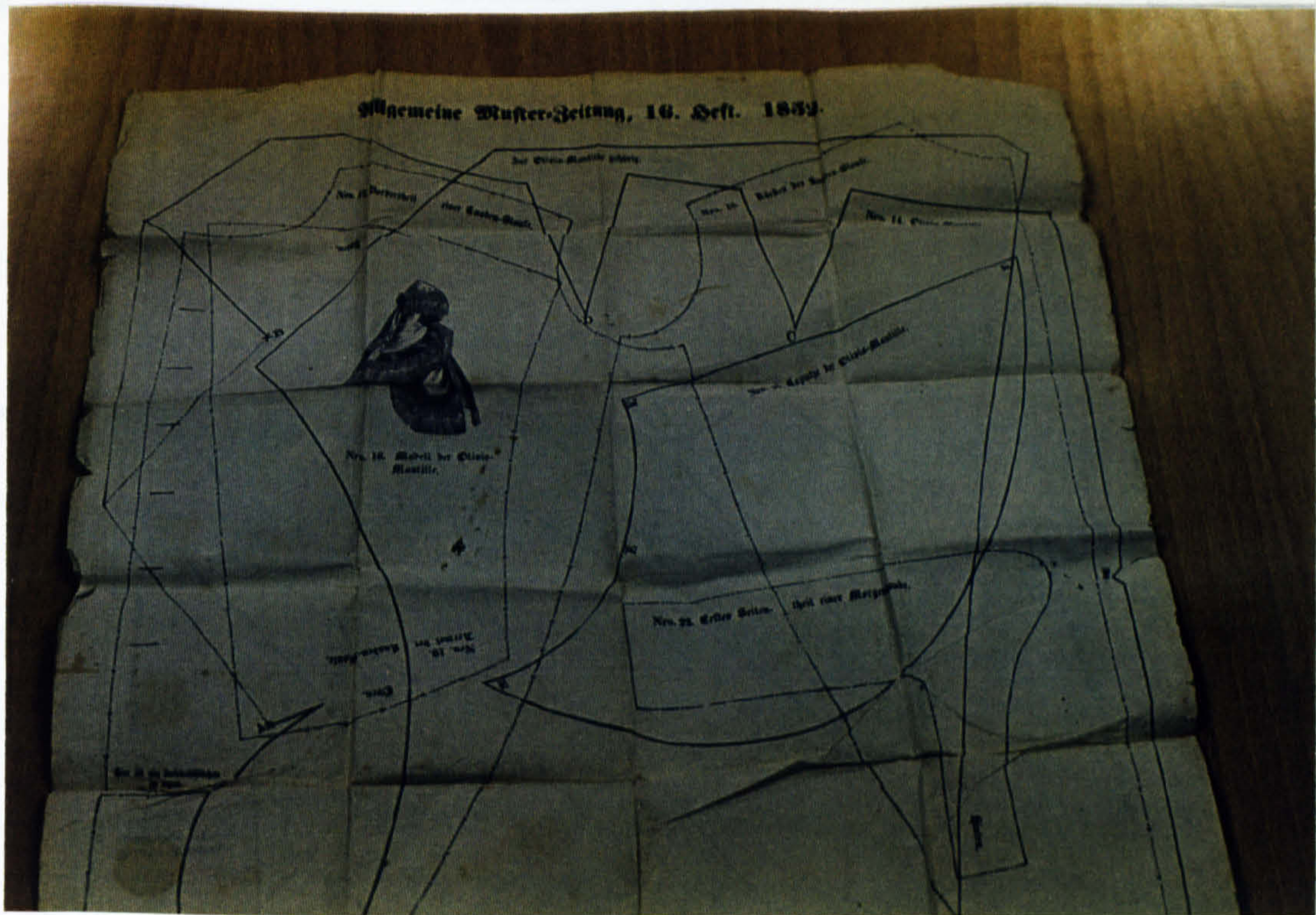
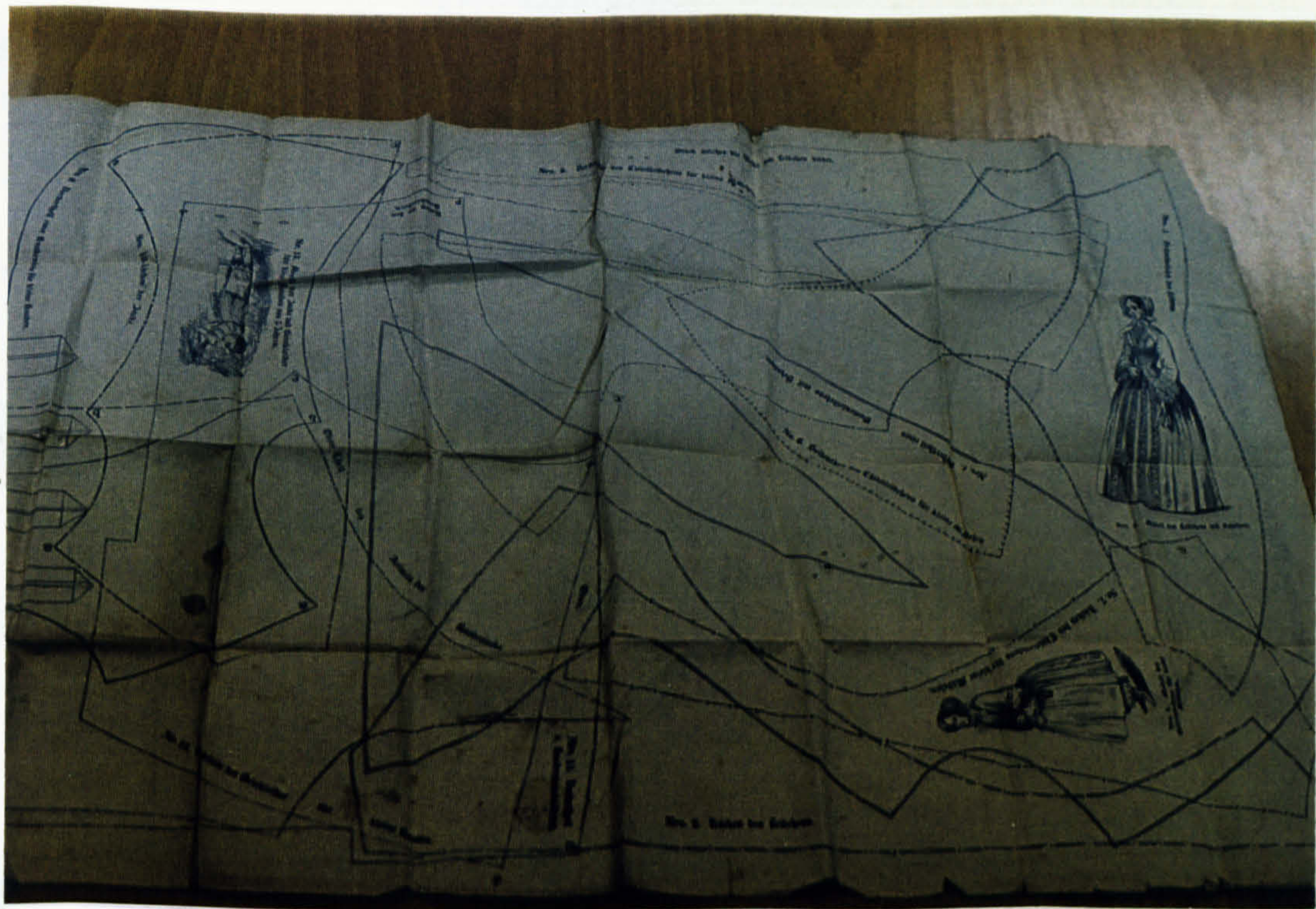


Plate 54. Plate 17 from The Workwoman's Guide of 1838, showing how to cut out men's shirts, several at a time, to avoid wasting any fabric.



Plates 55 a and b.

Details of a German pattern of 1852 from the Allgemeiner Muster-Zeitung. There are outlines of overlapping pattern pieces on both sides of the sheet for 1) the 'Olivia-mantell' (a tiered, fringed cloak with deep points at the front) 2) a 'Morgenhaube' (a ruched, frilled bonnet with ties, rather like a nightcap) 3) 'Modell der Jacke und Beinkleider für kleine Knaben von 5 Jahren' (jacket and trousers for a 5 year old boy) 4) 'Modell des Liebchen mit Schosen' (fitted jacket with frilled sleeves) 5) 'Modell des Chilet liebchens für kleine Mädchen' (a waistcoat for a little girl). The outlines of the pieces are distinguished by being printed with different types of line - eg -x-x-x, = = = , = . = . = , ~ ~ ~ . The layout is extremely confusing, and tracing the pattern pieces - as the maker would have had to do if she wanted to make more than one of the items - would have been a nightmare. The whole sheet is just 32 x 20 inches.

Fig. 1.

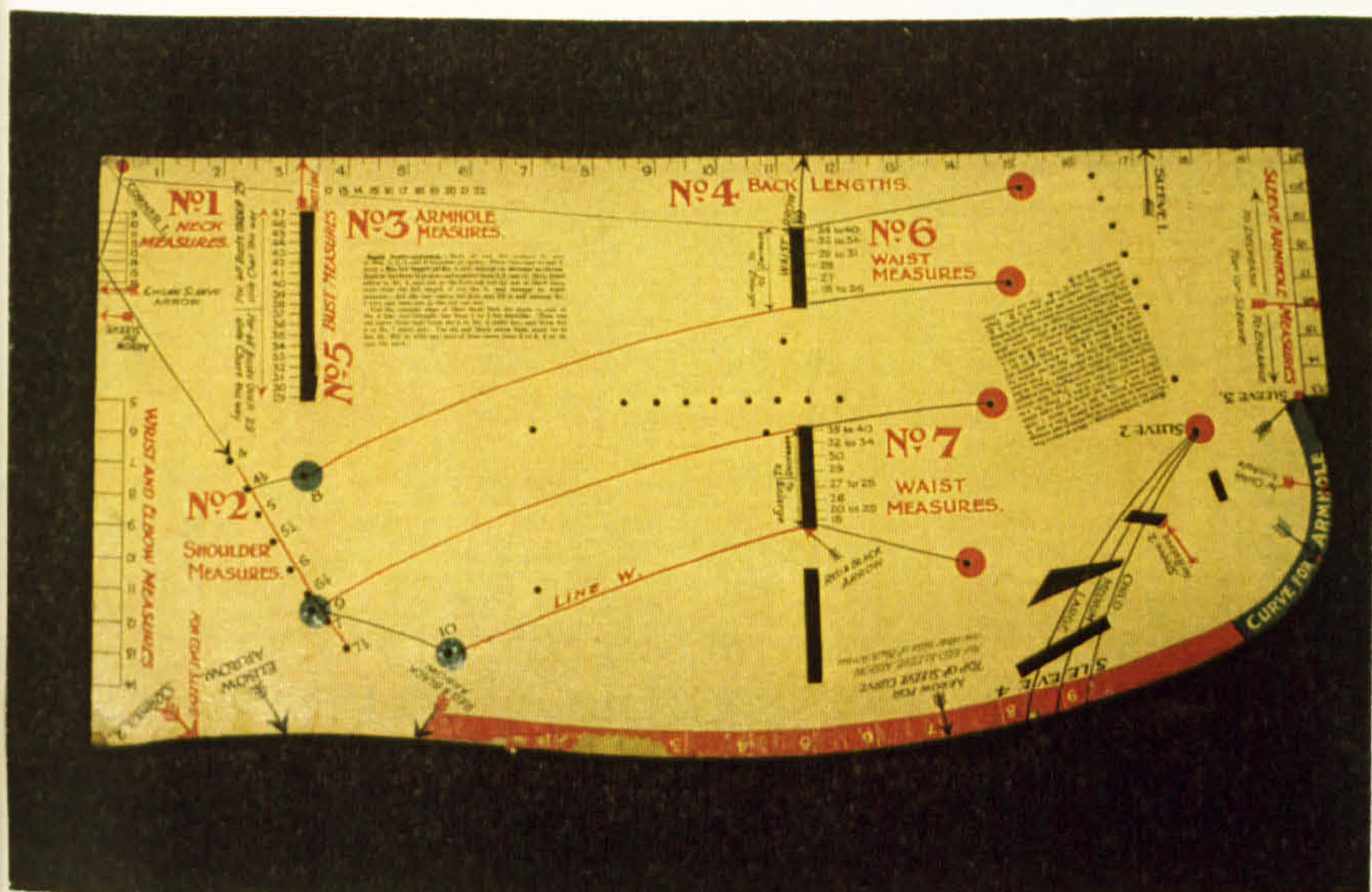


Plates 56 a and b
Measuring system, illustrated in Elise
Mangold's Dressmaking School for
All Time, 1861

Fig. 2.



Table 2.



Plates 57 a and b.

The two sides of the 'Dreadnought' pattern drafting chart. Early 20th century, but typical of the systems being marketed in the late 19th century (Staffordshire University Design Study Collection)

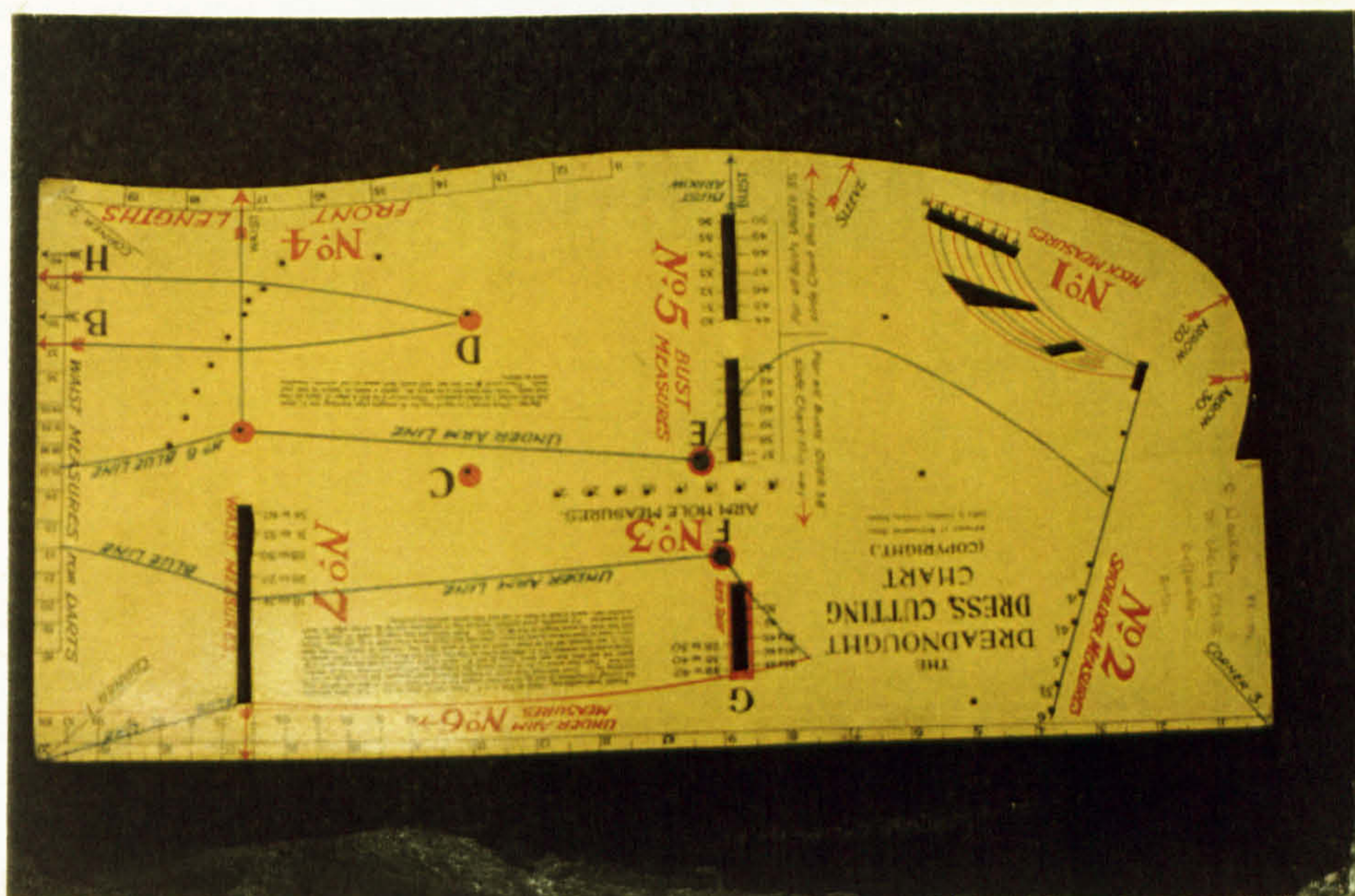


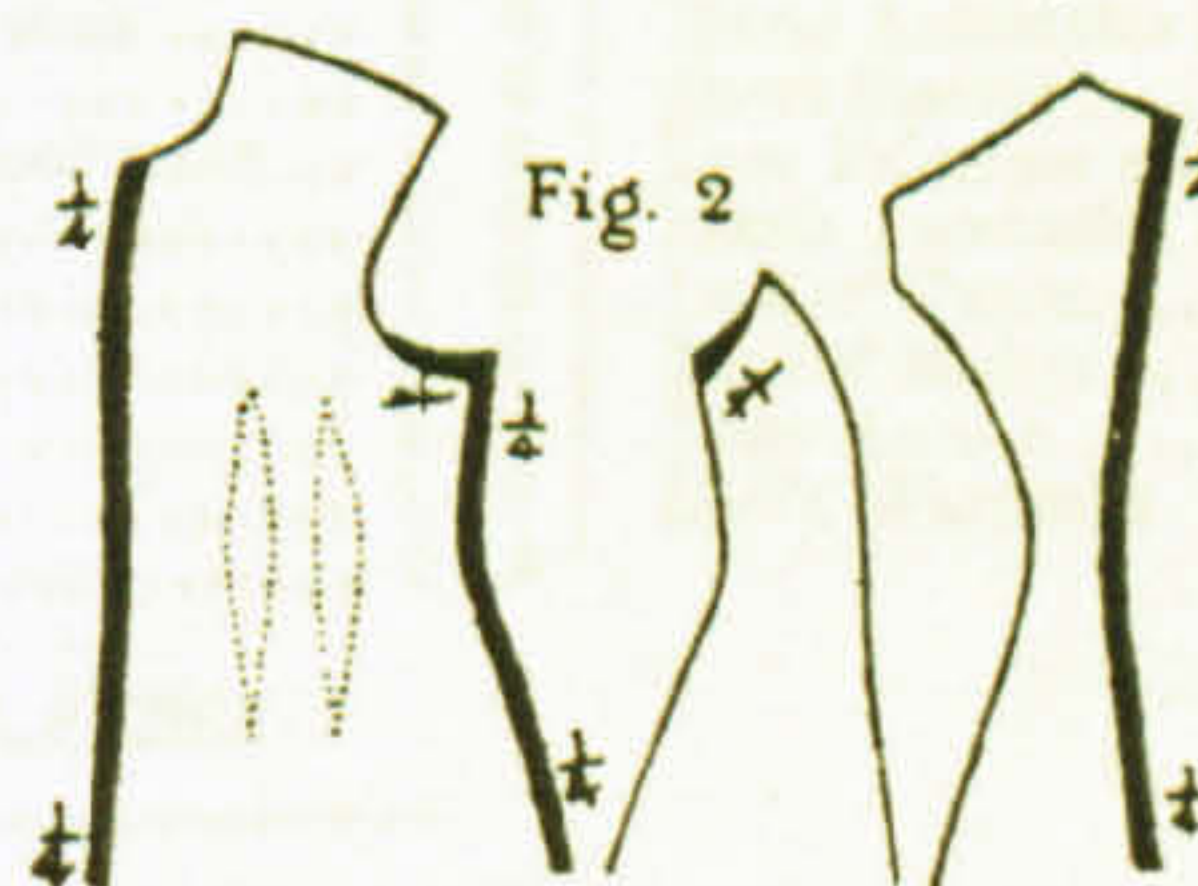
Plate 57 c

Instructions for changing the size of paper patterns from The London and Paris Ladies Magazine of Fashion for March 1879

HOW TO CHANGE THE SIZE OF OUR PATTERNS.

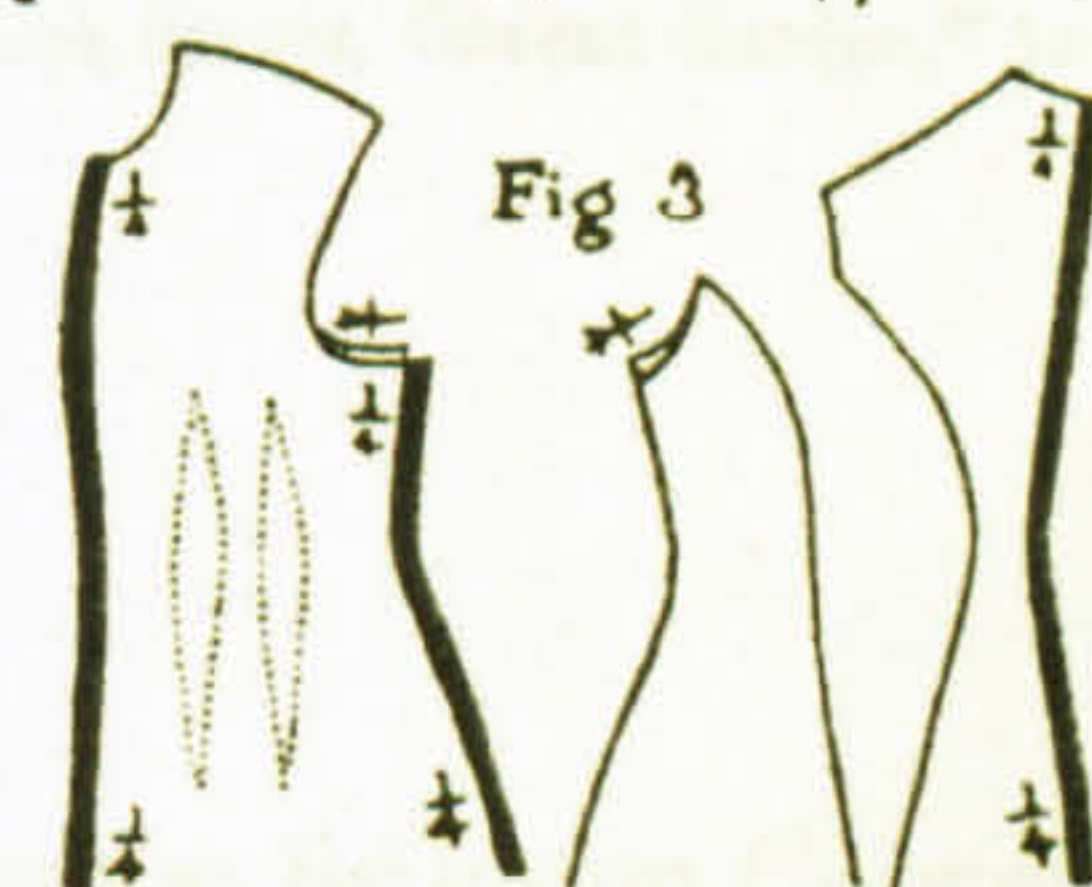
If a Lady possesses a good fitting body pattern, she can easily alter, to her own size, any of "DEVERE'S PARIS MODEL PATTERNS," which are all cut for 34½ inches Chest measure, 24 inches Waist measure, and 1½ inches Length of Waist. If a lady has not a body pattern of her own size, she can select one from Devere's Series of Patterns, which are cut for Chest measures ranging from 31½ to 42½; that is to say, from the most petite lady, to the tall lady of fine figure. Any size will be sent *post free*, for 6 stamps.

If however the lady is only a size larger or smaller than 34½ Chest, viz:—has a Chest measure of 36 or 33, then she can alter the size of the pattern when cutting out, by the instructions given in the following diagrams:—



TO ENLARGE A PATTERN FROM 34½ INCHES CHEST MEASURE TO 36 INCHES. FIG. 2.

Add to the front edge ½ of an inch, the same at the seam under the arm, and down the middle of back; these additions are indicated by the shaded parts. At the bottom of armhole, hollow out ½ of an inch, indicated by the black parts.



TO DECREASE A PATTERN FROM 34½ INCHES CHEST MEASURE TO 33 INCHES. FIG. 3.

Narrow the front edge ½ of an inch, and take off the same under the arm and at the middle of back, as shown by the black parts of the pattern. At the bottom of armhole, add the ½ of an inch indicated by the shaded portions.

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Ditto, with Train for indoor wear	6 6	Riding Trousers	1 9		
Indoor Dresses	4 6	MANTLES AND JACKETS.		UNDERCLOTHING.	
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The Lambelle Skirt, with Paniers & Revers	2 6	Polonaise	3 6	Ditto, for flannel	1 6
Plain Gored Skirt	1 6	Circulars	2 0	Petticoat Bodices, high or low	1 0
Ditto, without Pleats	1 6	CHILDREN'S PATTERNS.		Sets of Underlinen, including the above-named articles	6 6
Ditto, trimmed	2 0	Children's Dresses, fashionably trimmed, for ages from 1 to 8	1 6	New Panier Crinoline	1 6
Watteau ditto	1 9	Ditto, for Children from 9 to 15	2 6	Bouffantes to wear over ditto	1 0
Panier Walking Skirts	1 9	Ditto, Morning Dress	1 6	Filled Gored Petticoat	1 9
Ditto, with Petticoats	2 3	Ditto, Chemise Russe	1 0	Ditto, with band complete	2 0
Ditto, with Train for indoor wear	3 6	Ditto, Mantles or Jackets	1 6	Camisoles	1 3
BODICES.		Ditto, Pinafores and Aprons	1 0	Ladies' Dressing Gowns	2 9
Plain High Bodice	1 6	Children's Pelisses	1 6	Gentlemen's Dressing Gowns	2 9
Trimmed ditto	2 0	The Princess Pelisse	1 9	Bathing Dresses	1 9
Chemise Russe	1 6	Marie Antoinette Costume	1 9		
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Louis XV. ditto	2 0	Boys' Knickerbocker Suits	1 3	Fashionably-trimmed open & close Sleeves	0 9
Muslin ditto	1 6	Jacket and Waistcoat for out-door wear	1 0	Marie Antoinette Sleeve	0 9
Low ditto, with Bertha	2 0	Tunics, high or low	1 0	Short Sleeves	0 9
Swiss ditto	1 9	Pinafores	1 0	Lace Pelisses and Fichus	1 9
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LE BEAU MONDE

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Plate 60 a. Fashion plate for April, 1874 from the Milliners' and Dressmakers' Gazette of Fashion. The pattern pieces to make the dress on the right were given away free with the magazine. These were scaled up to create the dress which appears in plates 60 b and c..



Plate 60 b.

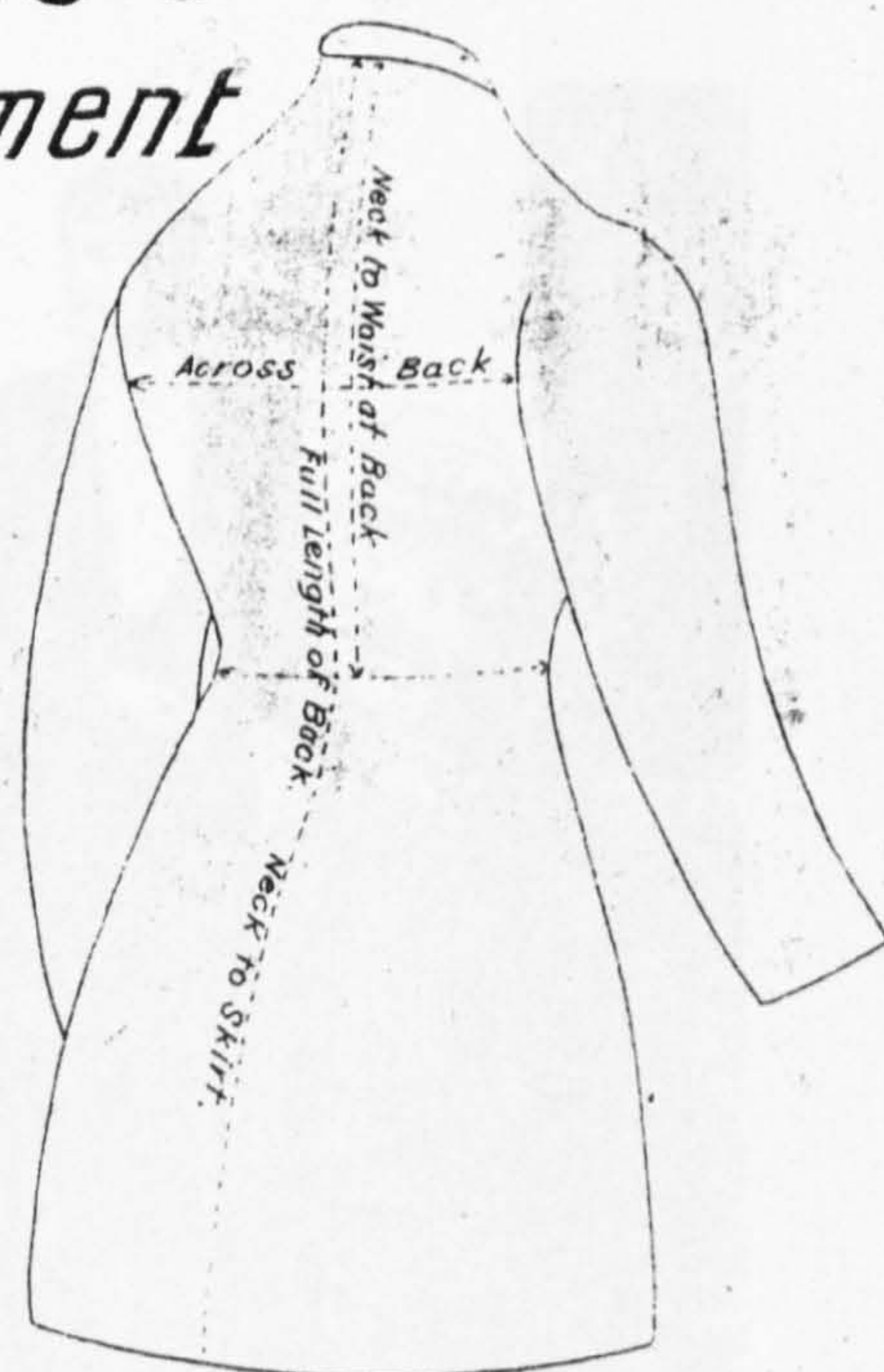
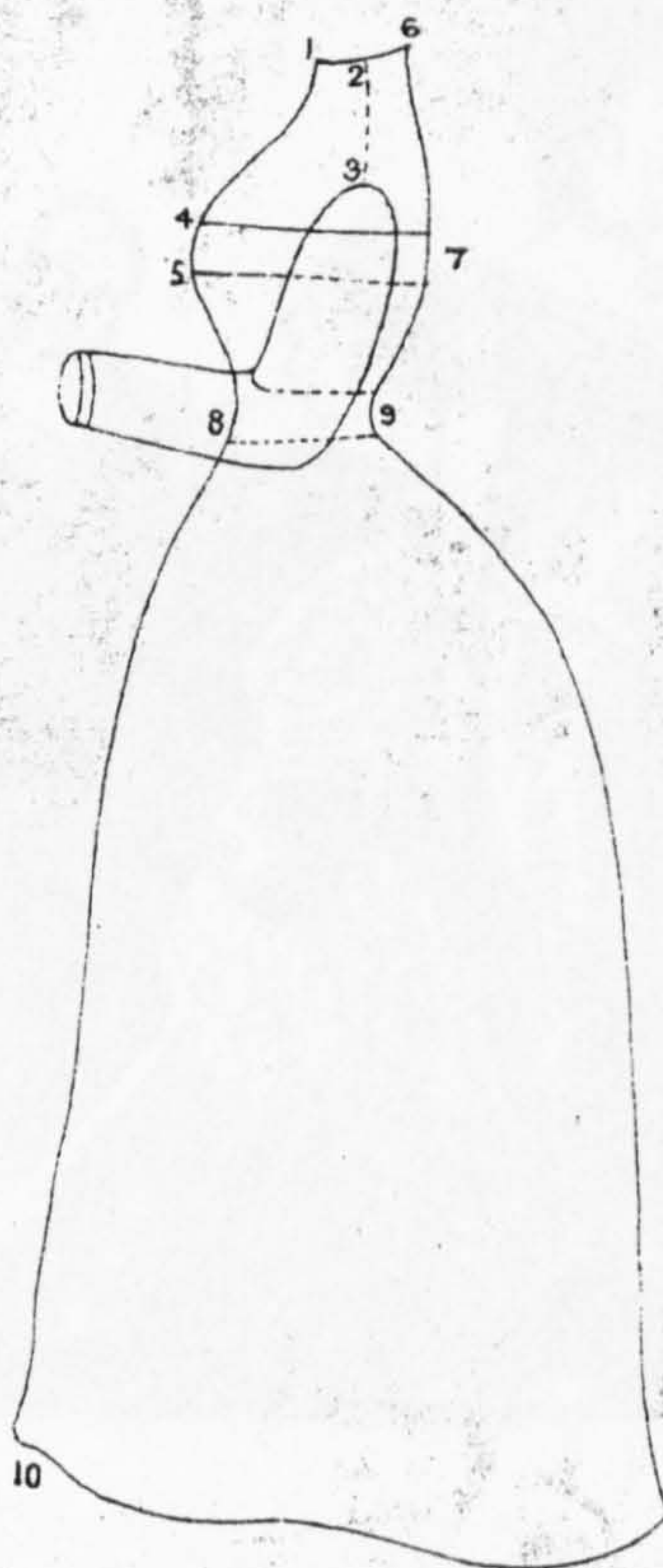
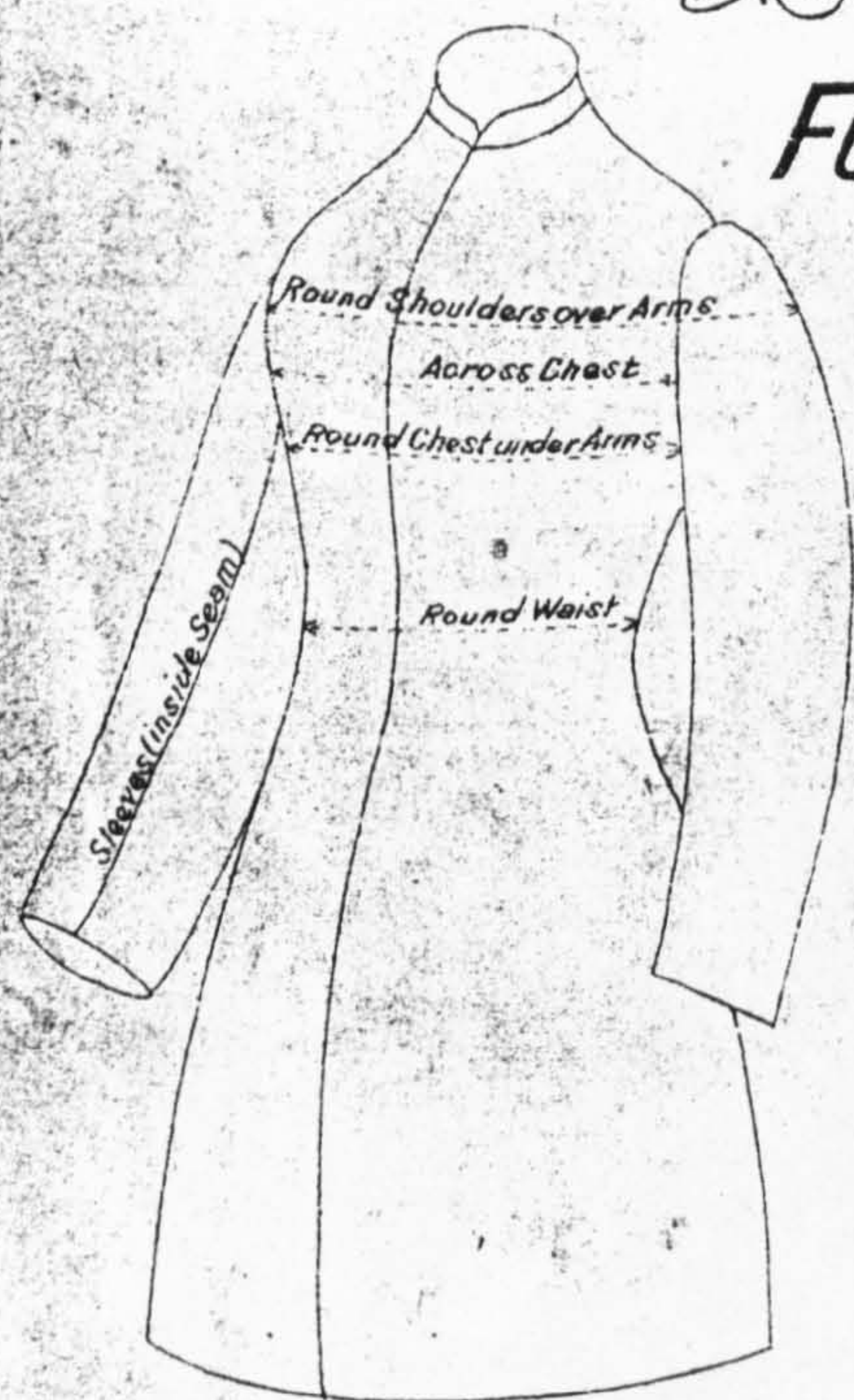
Dress, made by the author and a colleague in 1997, from the pattern which accompanied the fashion plate shown in plate 58. Drafting the pattern to fit the wearer, making and adapting a half-toile and completing the dress took approximately 33 woman-hours, using a sewing machine. The fabric was a heavy black synthetic, probably rather softer and heavier than the silk which it was intended to imitate.

Plate 60 c (below). The author, making up the toile (which later formed the lining of the dress) in printed cotton.



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LENGTHS NECK TO WAIST (FRONT) 1 TO 8

" " " (BACK) 6 TO 9

" UNDER ARM TO WAIST

" SKIRT FRONT 8 TO 10

" SLEEVE INSIDE SEAM

ACROSS CHEST AT 4

ROUND NECK 1 TO 1

" CHEST OVER ARM 4 TO 4

" " UNDER " 5 TO 5

WAIST TIGHT 8 TO 8

ARM HOLE 3 TO 3

ACROSS BACK AT 7

*MILTON HOUSE,
Cowcaddens Street, GLASGOW.*



Plate 62. Punch cartoon of 1876. The caption reads '*Shall we - a - Sit down? I should like to; but my Dressmaker says I mustn't!*' Dresses at this period were heavily boned and fitted very closely making movement difficult.

Chapter six

The end product

'— the greater part of the expenditure incurred by all classes for apparel is incurred for the sake of respectable appearance rather than for the protection of the person. — People will undergo a very considerable degree of privation in the comforts or necessities of life in order to afford what is considered a decent amount of wasteful consumption; —' (Thorsten Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Classes, 1957, pp.167-8)

Dressing correctly was the passport to respectable society. Failing to do so was social suicide. Nineteenth century society was mobile and as the 19th century progressed more and more women wished to be seen as ladies. Many books and journals were produced to tell them what to wear, and how to afford it. But it was dressmakers who could translate women's demands into wearable realities. It was also, as Veblen pointed out, the aspirations, rather than the actual needs, of their clients that provided dressmakers with their living. It is therefore useful to look at what fashion writers suggested women needed, and at what real women actually ordered from their dressmakers.

Fashion writers

One of the best known of these writers was 'Sylvia' who wrote How to Dress Well on a Shilling a Day in 1876. There was virtually no general inflation in the 19th century - prices for garments were much the same at the end of the century as they had been at the beginning - so many of 'Sylvia's' strictures would have been equally applicable to an earlier audience. 'Sylvia' interpreted a '*shilling a day*' as fifteen pounds a year, but assumed that her reader would not be starting her wardrobe from scratch - she would already have a stock of underwear, collars, cuffs, laces and so on. It would, 'Sylvia' advised, cost about 30s a year to keep this stock in repair and to replace items as they wore out. A further £3 a year should be allowed for boots and shoes, and £1 for gloves (8 pairs at 2s-6d each) plus 1s-6d for cleaning them. This left £9-8s-6d for dresses, bonnets and mantles. As a bare minimum, she suggested that ladies should have one hat and one bonnet for winter and one of each for summer, at a suggested price of 13s to 14s apiece, though they need not all be replaced every year. She strongly recommended her readers to learn to make - or trim- their own millinery, and advised them against using feathers unless they were good, expensive ones. Cheap feathers, she felt, soon looked tatty. Hats and bonnets were supposed to match the dresses they were worn with, and to reduce expense, 'Sylvia' suggested that her readers keep to a single colour range in their choice of clothes - she herself recommended brown. Respectable ladies did not wear bright colours - and garments that had to 'do' for several seasons should not call attention to

themselves. A winter dress could be made from 8 yards of brown cashmere at 3s-6d a yard with 4 yards of matching silk at 4s a yard and 3 or 4 shillings worth of buttons and trimmings at a total cost of £2-8s.

No allowance was made for paying the dressmaker - 'Sylvia's ladies were all expected to do most of their own sewing, and in case they could not, she included basic instructions - but she did suggest that they should spend £2 on a jacket *'from the tailor if possible'*. There should be one new jacket each year - alternately for summer and winter. The basic wardrobe of dresses - alongside the new brown cashmere - would be - one good quality black grenadine *'(which must be respectfully regarded for out of £15 a year how are we ever to have another?)'*, a white pique, a striped lawn, two or three muslins and two or three thick morning dresses, an everyday dress for church and visiting and a simple dress for evening parties and dinners. If that was not available:-

'It is a good idea to wear black very often for dinner, if dressing for that meal be the rule. Black grenadine is invaluable in this way. Like silk, it will "do up" over and over again, and, worn with different coloured ribbons, one does not get tired of it ---' 'Summer muslins with pretty fichus will also do for dinner ---'.¹

Most of the rest of the £15 was to be spent on trimmings to re-vamp dresses and bonnets, and on wraps and fichus to give familiar dresses a new lease of life, but a pound or two should be kept in hand in case an unexpected invitation made a new outfit essential. 'Sylvia' was full of advice about buying good quality, cleaning garments, adding coloured neckties to basic (brown) dresses to brighten them up, re-trimming hats and bonnets, what colours should be dyed what and in what order and not dyeing silks as they tended to go streaky and thin. *'Poverty must, above all things, avoid the appearance of poverty'*² she stressed. If everyone who read her book had taken her advice, 'Sylvia' would have put many a dressmaker out of business.

Mrs Eliza Warren, editress of the Ladies Treasury and various other magazines, published How I managed my house on £200 a year in 1864. It was written as a personal story and became very well known - a parody of it by 'Mr Warren' appeared in 1878, entitled How they mismanaged their house on £500 a year. Mrs Warren gave less information on dress than 'Sylvia' did, and her favourite colour was black not brown, but her advice was very similar - to buy a few, good quality items and not to draw attention to one's dress by wearing bright colours or garish patterns -

¹'Sylvia', How to Dress Well on a Shilling a Day (1876) p.13

² Ibid. p.10

'If I purchased an inexpensive material, I did not call attention to it with trimming and paltry lace, but it was well-shaped and well-made, and simply trimmed, so that by this means it escaped particular notice. I also avoided buying anything with other than the most simple pattern on it. I had no desire to be known at any distance by my dress. The plainest, richest silk - generally black - was my best dress; and the exquisite, fine, soft, silky black alpaca my home and evening dress — The same by bonnets - of a good material, but so simple and plain, though always of the best shape, that they were generally becoming ---³.

Fortunately, most women ignored these writers. Museum costume collections contain plenty of drab dresses in blacks and browns, but there are also numerous brightly coloured garments, elaborately trimmed and showily styled.

Mrs Praga's Appearances and how to keep them up on a limited income of 1899 followed a similar theme, though she allowed herself more money to spend (£25 a year). She, too, advised her readers to go for quality and unexceptional styles. She

'was fortunate enough to discover a little woman in our vicinity who fitted really well, and whose charge for making was only half a guinea ---- though I was careful to have my gowns as well made as my means would allow, I never invested in anything ultra fashionable, for I knew that markedly fashionable soon becomes markedly unfashionable ---⁴.

With attitudes like these being peddled, dressmakers had an uphill struggle to make a living.

Mrs Haweis who wrote The Art of Dress in 1879 was very dubious about dressmakers. She urged her readers to keep a close check on the amount of fabric they used as *'-- the dressmaker will insist on 7 or 8 yards, more than she can use, and retain a yard or two, unused, for herself⁵*. She was also critical of contemporary fashions with their kilted flounces and drapes, which, she felt, were designed specifically to disguise how much fabric was needed. R Monroe's Practical Dressmaking, also of the 1870s, purported to teach ladies how to do their own dressmaking - or at least to understand what it involved - for precisely those reasons. She began:-

'The failings of dressmakers are almost as favourite a topic of conversation as is the degeneration of domestic service, wherever women most do congregate; the changes being

³ Warren, Mrs, How I Managed My House on £200 A Year (1864), pp.86-87

⁴ Praga, Mrs, Appearances and How to Keep Them up on a Limited Income (1899), pp.130 and 133

⁵ Haweis, Mrs, The Art of Dress, (1879), p.62

*rung on their exorbitant charges, bad fit or style, incredible consumption of material, and unpunctuality in sending home articles distinctly promised at a given time.*⁶

Ms Monroe blamed ladies own ignorance of the costs of linings and trimmings and of the amounts of fabric it took to make a garment *'all of which are often doubled and after every imaginable and unimaginable item has been put down in this way, there is still an exasperating 3s-6d for "extras" ---'*⁷. It has to be said that few of the numerous dressmakers' bills which survive substantiate these claims. Ms Monroe and Mrs Haweis had their own agendas.

Ada Ballin in her Science of Dress in Theory and Practice of 1885 actually advocated the establishment of an Anti-Dressmaker's Tyranny League and advised her readers to get their clothes made by tailors *'For tailors are not only more accurate in their fit than dressmakers but they are also more attentive to instructions and less pig-headed --'*⁸! Ms Ballin had clearly had some unfortunate experiences - which reinforces the impression that dressmakers were not all deferential to their clients.

Not all dressmakers' clients were wealthy. A surprisingly large number of poor women patronised dressmakers and certain types of shop came into being specifically to cater for them - usually run by poor women with some flair for the job, working in their own homes. Sir Frederick Eden estimated, in his State of the Poor, 1797, that a labourer's family needed to spend approximately £1-16s to £2 a head a year on new clothes for each adult, though few such families were able to afford anything like that sum⁹. Nonetheless, poor families did use the services of dressmakers. Dr Shaw of the Leicester Royal Infirmary told the Children's Employment Commission in 1843:-

'In this town there is a considerable number of dressmakers employed by the poorer classes. This depends on the fact of the wives of the mechanics being in general entirely

⁶ Op cit, Monroe (1879) Introduction

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ballin, Ada, Science of Dress in Theory and Practice (1885) pp.190-1

⁹ Eden, Sir Frederick, The State of the Poor (1797) pp.556-557. He arrived at this figure by quoting prices of basic garments in both Cumberland and London. However, he also gives family budgets. A carter's family in Manchester, with five children under 12, and a joint annual income of £44-4s, spent £5 a year on clothes. A cooper's family in Frome spent £14 of their total annual income of £63-14s on clothing for two adults and five children aged 7 to 18 (this included £1-5s on shoes), while a Kendall weaver with three children aged 7 to 11 received £29-5s for a year's work and spent £1-4s-6d of it on clothing - pp.359, 645 and 768

*ignorant of all domestic knowledge, and who consequently are unable to make their own dresses*¹⁰.

Samuel Page, a Birmingham button maker voiced a similar complaint

*'---if the body-linen gets out of order it must either be sent out to be mended at an expense, or left as it is --- It would be a great advantage to the family if the wife knew how to cut out, make and repair the linen*¹¹.

Sixteen year old Caroline Ormer, who worked for a London coffin maker, confirmed that neither she nor her mother could sew. Her interviewer reported that she

*'--- cannot cut out and make any part of her things; is obliged to put them out and pay for them; it would have been an advantage if she had been taught such things; her mother cannot make things for her.*¹²

There were probably many women in the industrial towns who were second and third generation factory hands, whose mothers and grandmothers had never had the leisure to teach them to sew. Even a generation after the Education Act, many girls could not do simple needlework. E. Sneyd Kynnersley in his book, HMI, wrote about his experiences as a school inspector in the 1870s and 80s. He confessed that the (male) inspectors knew very little about the needlework they were supposed to be examining, and had no way of knowing whether the garments they were shown had actually been made by the girls who claimed them. In some cases he knew, the teachers made the garments themselves and passed them off as the pupils' work; sometimes schools kept a stock of garments that were brought out year after year for inspection; sometimes the inspectors were given machine made samples that were presented as handwork¹³.

Mrs Alec Tweedie wrote an article in Home Notes on August 18th, 1896, deploring how few servants and children's nursemaids could sew well enough to keep clothes in repair. She wrote of a friend who had tried to set up evening needlework classes in Whitechapel, but the girls

¹⁰ Children's Employment Commission, Vol X, interviewee 627, p.f237

¹¹ Ibid, interviewee 360, p. f134

¹² Ibid, interviewee 449, p. f161

¹³ Kynnersley, E Sneyd, HMI, some passages in the life of one of HM Inspectors of schools, (1908), pp.313-325. One teacher was quoted thus *'I am surprised that Mary Jane has failed --- she wasn't that bad at sums, and it wasn't for her needlework, for I did that myself.'* (p.324)

'positively scoffed at the idea of making a neat dress for themselves, and far preferred to skimp, even half starve themselves, to put by a few pence a week to buy this awful holiday gown, and still more awful Sunday hat'.

The consumer culture had reached the slums. *'Out of the thousands of young women in Whitechapel --- it is only here and there that one can be found who even knows how to thread a needle'* concluded Mrs Tweedie despairingly.

How dresses were made

The purpose of this section is to illustrate and describe a number of dresses from the collection of the former Leicestershire Museums Service to show the complexity of dressmaking in the period under review. Styles changed rapidly, particularly after 1840, and dressmakers constantly needed to update their techniques. I am extremely grateful to Jane May and Sarah Levitt of Leicester City Museums for allowing me to examine and photograph their collection.

I have included some dresses worn by very ordinary people (1, 8, 11 and 14) and some which clearly belonged to wealthy owners (3a, b and c, 7, 12, 17 and 21). However, it is not always easy to be sure of the social status of individual garments. An item, might, for example, be the everyday dress of a wealthy woman, or the best dress of someone lower down the social scale. Indeed, given the quantity of second hand clothing in circulation, the same outfit might have fulfilled both roles at different times.

Dressmakers today use different methods - necklines are faced, shaping is done with darts, and hems are put up with hem stitch not running stitch, for example. These differences will be explained in detail, as will stylistic changes, the first time they occur.

1) Striped silk dress c.1770-85 (24.1938.3)

This dress is in very poor condition and has apparently been adapted for fancy dress wear with two clumsy darts in the bodice front. The waist seam is also partially unpicked at the front. There is evidence of earlier stitching, so this dress has probably been re-made at least once. It is an 'open robe' - which would have been worn over a matching or contrasting 'petticoat' (or under-skirt) - a style very typical of basic dresses in the second half of the 18th century. Beneath it the owner would have worn a chemise (a wide, low-necked, short-sleeved, loose, knee-length garment of cotton or linen) and a rigid corset (on top of the chemise) which would have given her upper body the characteristic conical 18th century shape,

regardless of the figure inside it. The silk is a lightweight taffeta which was a very popular material, especially for summer wear.

The bodice and sleeves are lined with coarse cotton fabric and the shoulder straps with an even coarser canvas-like material. The bodice is made up of eight pieces, and seams are used for shaping where a modern garment would use darts. To some extent, this method was dictated by the narrow breadth of fashionable silks which made it difficult to cut a full back or front. The neckline is square and is held firm by folded bands of fabric. The sleeves are elbow length, and end with a simple, slightly shaped band. In wear, detachable lace or muslin sleeve frills would have been tacked inside this band. The skirt is unlined but the inner hem is edged with ribbon to strengthen it. The robings (front edges) of the skirt are pinked. Simple decoration like this (done with a shaped tool, mallet and block) was common on everyday dresses. More elaborate garments had complicated applied trimmings - see 3a), b) and c), for example. The lustring was 22 ½ inches wide (two full breadths and four half breadths are used in the skirt) and the garment is made up using a neat, but quite coarse, running stitch. Jeanette Davis, describes how the standard stitch for seaming skirts was running stitch with the occasional back stitch, and how *'long needles were preferred by the workers as enabling them to cover the lengths more quickly'*¹⁴. The skirt was folded over at the waist, tightly gathered, and then oversewn to the bodice. This technique remained common for most of our period and enabled the skirt to be made separately by outworkers - though this does not seem to have been common practice until the 19th century.

Such a garment would have presented few problems to the dressmaker. This is a simple, everyday garment for a respectable woman. Similar style robes had been worn for at least thirty years before this one was made. The fabric is striped and so there would have been little wastage in matching the pattern. The bodice fronts overlap and would have been held in place with pins - thus making the bodice fit neatly would not have been difficult. The only complicated part would have been ensuring the neatness of the centre back seams where the styling retains vestiges of the 'sacque back' fashionable in the 1760s. (See plate 2) However, the light fabric would have pleated and seamed neatly. (Plate 63)

¹⁴ Davis, op cit, (1894), p.103



Plates 63 a, b and c
Striped lustring dress 1770-85 (24.1938.3)

(Top left) Complete dress.

(Top right) Detail of skirt seam showing the comparatively coarse stitching.

(Bottom) Front edge. The decoration has been done with a block and pinking iron - the edges are raw. The fabric has been pieced.



Plates 63 d and e

(Top) Detail of back showing complex seaming and vestige of 'sacque back' cut at waist.

(Bottom) Detail of bodice showing lining, the way the square neck is bound, the set of the sleeves coming high over the shoulder to the side of the neck, and the shaping of the fronts. The skirt has been partially unpicked at the front waist.



2) Green brocade dress, 1770s (565.1977)

This dress is very similar in style to 1). It is in excellent condition, and is interesting because it is made of a fabric which dates from the 1730s¹⁵. There is no obvious evidence that this is an earlier dress that has been re-made - though the fabric is very robust and heavily brocaded which would tend to disguise earlier stitch marks - but there is certainly a discrepancy between the date of the silk and the date of the garment.

It is made much as 1), with a heavy cotton lining to the bodice. A narrow strip of soft cream silk lines the inside edges of the skirt fronts and hem, and there are traces of it at the waist also. The sleeves end in double frills which have pinked edges. In this case the fabric is a mere 16 ½ inches wide, and the pattern repeat is 22 inches, making for considerable difficulties in cutting pattern pieces and matching the design. The bodice is open, and would have been worn pinned over a 'stomacher' (a triangular piece of fabric, often quilted or embroidered) which would have obviated the problems of making the bodice fit. However, the fabric is stiff and bulky and much less easy to work neatly than the lustring of 1). Gathering the skirt neatly at the waist, setting the sleeves, and arranging the back seams would have required skill and dexterity. (Plate 64)



Plate 64 a. Green brocade dress 1770s (565.1977). Detail of the bodice showing lining, cut and the way the skirt is attached to the bodice, also remnants of lining silk at the waist

¹⁵ According to Natalie Rothstein, formerly of the Textile Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum.



Plates 64 b, c and d

(Top left) Rear view of the complete dress showing the same features as 1 d.

(Top right) Detail of sleeve showing the double cuff with pinked edges.

(Bottom) Detail of the inside of the skirt front showing remnants of silk facing at edge and hem and also details of the coarse stitching.

Dresses 1) and 2) are deceptively simple. Some 18th century dresses were extremely complicated as the following illustrated details of dresses (3) show. (Plate 65)



Plates 65 a and b. Pink and green brocade dress, 1770s (un-registered)

(Left) Complete dress, shown on a hanger. It has a sacque back, train, and panniers which are visible as multiple folds of fabric at the sides. It has been much repaired and altered. This is a truly vulgar garment.

(Right) Detail of padded trimming. The pendant decorations are made of silk covered wire.



Plates 65 c, d and e
Green and white brocade gown, (565.1977)
1760s-70s

(Top) Detail of petticoat and robings to show elaborate trimming. Creating even loops of fabric in this way would have been a lot less easy than it appears.

Brocade dress with panniers and sacque back, c.1775 (504.1969)

(Bottom left) Detail of cuff showing braid and lace trimming.

(Bottom right) Skirt showing detail of braid and lace trimming at left front with the pannier shape laid out in position. This trimming consists of bands of lace, gathered, and bands of the same lace laid out in zig zags in padded loops with small chenille knots.



4) Cream silk damask, 1770-80 (un-registered)

This is an open robe and would originally have been worn over a quilted silk 'petticoat'. The bodice is lined with glazed linen, and is cut in the same style as 1) and 2). The silk on the sleeves has been pieced. Traces of the original silk drawstring remain at the neck. Fastenings in the shape of hooks and eyes, a bone and tapes have been added at the fronts, though originally such a garment would have been held in place with pins. Some of the hooks and eyes appear to be mid-Victorian, the rest are 20th century. The dress is a very small size, but has been taken in, probably to fit a child, sometime in the 20th century. A modern name tape for 'Sophie T Hudson' suggests that the dress may have been used in a school play or pageant. Some of the tucks have been made using a sewing machine, and the swathes of silk at the elbows are modern. The skirt, however, retains the original tapes which tie together to loop it up into a 'polonaise'. These are stitched to the inside of the skirt, but not at the seams, which would seem to be the most efficient place to put them for strength. Traces of the original silk facings remain at hem and fronts. The brocade is 20 inches in breadth. Most of the alterations have been made at the front so the back view is much as it would have been when first made. (Plate 66)



Plate 66 a. Cream silk damask dress 1770-80 (un-registered)

Detail of bodice, showing the lining. Note the crude modern alterations at the side and centre back. The skirt ties are tied together as they would be in wear. The piecing of the sleeves and the modern cuffs are clearly visible.



Plates 66 b and c

(Top) Complete dress shown from behind with the skirt looped up.

(Bottom) Detail of the inside of the dress showing the lining, the set of the sleeves, the way the skirt is attached to the bodices and one of the skirt ties.



5) Printed cotton gown, 1790s (32.1938.1)

This dress is a 'round' gown (as opposed to an open robe). It is made of English printed cotton - the fabric is woven with three blue threads in the selvedge which denotes that it was woven in England between 1774 and 1811. Cotton cloth woven in England carried a lower rate of excise when printed than did cottons woven abroad¹⁶. Cottons were made in wider breadths than silks, and this one is 36 inches wide. The bodice and sleeves are lined with coarse cotton. The bodice has eyelet holes down both fronts, so it must have laced. A hook and eye have been added at some later date. The sleeves are long - they would have reached the knuckles as was fashionable - and narrow, held in position with a buttoned band at the wrist. The skirt has an 'apron' fastening that went up under the fronts and was tied in position with a bow at the back. It is still comparatively full. The stitching is very neat and tight, and the hem is taken up with a small running stitch rather than hem stitch - this was usual for most of our period.

The cut of the skirt, the uneven gathering - with extra fullness at the centre back - and the apron front, were new in the 1790s, as were the long, fitted sleeves. The resulting shape was very unlike that of the previous eight decades. Cottons and muslins became fashionable in the 1790s. They were easier to work than silk but were much less easy to keep clean in the working. (Plate 67)



Plate 67 a. Dress of printed cotton 1790s (32.1938.1) Detail showing the cut of the apron front, the lining, the front lace holes and the cut of the neck which is still very similar to dresses 1) and 2).

¹⁶ Victoria and Albert Museum, English Printed Textiles 1720-1836, (1960) p.4



Plates 67 b and c

(Top) Complete dress showing the bodice covering the apron front and the extra-long sleeves with straps at the cuffs.

(Bottom) Detail of one of the skirt seams showing the three blue lines woven into the selvedge.



6) Printed lawn dress, c.1805 (170.1962)

The fashionable shape of the 1790s gradually became leaner and skimpier. Fashionable dresses clung to their wearers' contours. Waists moved up to just below the bust. Sleeves were worn short or very long. Cottons and muslins - preferably in neo-classical white or pale colours - remained the mode.

This dress is a fine example of the understated fashion of the early 19th century. It is made of a very fine lawn with a delicate print in brown and yellow. Narrow borders of matching print trim the neck and sleeves, while the yard long train is edged with a wider version of the same border print, part of which is printed, curved, as part of the main yardage. It is a highly sophisticated print, and the yellow was in fact a new shade, from a South American oak bark.

The bodice back is cut in a diamond shape, with the shoulder seams dropped and the back shaping seams curving out to the armhole. It is deceptively simple in appearance - an elegant but tricky way of fitting the back of a high-waisted garment. The flimsy fabric is mounted on a solid cotton under-bodice, and the 'apron' front now incorporated the bodice front, fastening at the front corners of the square neckline with loops and buttons. (Plate 68)



Plate 68 a. Dress of printed lawn c.1805 (170.1962)

Detail of train showing border and side seam. This border is printed, not applied, and part of it is printed curved and part straight.



Plates 68 b and c

(Top) Complete dress.

(Bottom) Back showing the narrow cut and the set of the sleeves. The skirt is tightly gathered at the centre back and loosely pleated at the sides and front. The ties tie in position, at the front, and the apron front covers them.





Plate 68 d and e. (Top) Detail of bodice showing lining, applied border at neck, and the way the skirt opens as an apron front.

(Bottom) Bodice front with the apron front in position. Small loops on the corners attached to buttons which are now missing, or were pinned in place.

7) Yellow silk dress with gauze overdress, tambour embroidered with pansies, 1820-23 (98.1955.2)

Clinging muslin dresses were replaced by garments with slightly fuller, shorter skirts, but high waists remained in fashion.

This is a stunning evening dress and a splendid example of complex dressmaking. It has been heavily restored, but is still worthy of close examination. The under-dress is of bright yellow soft silk, with a low round neck and puff sleeves. The bodice is lined with cotton. It fastens at the back - unlike dresses of the previous hundred years - with tapes that run in channels at the neck and waist. The puff sleeves are complicated in cut, with shaped bands. The hem of the skirt is slightly padded to make it stand out¹⁷. The over-tunic is sleeveless, and also fastens at the back. It is tambour embroidered in puce and yellow with tiny, life size sprays of wild pansies¹⁸. This is almost certainly professional embroidery, and seems to have been worked specifically to the shape of this garment. The neck and front are edged with overlapping triangles of puce and yellow satin, and the hem is trimmed with two padded rouleaux of the same material. It would, originally, have had a matching sash.

Time has, to some extent, softened the colours, but it is still a garish combination. Perhaps it was more flattering in candle light. From the point of view of fit, this was not a difficult dress to make - the bodice is fairly loose and much of the fit comes from the gathering tapes. The skirt is full and only requires to fit at the waist and be the right length (shortening the overdress would have involved a complete remake - or at least unpicking at the waist). It is the detail that would have presented problems - particularly because of the slippery, loosely woven fabrics that were used. It is also interesting to speculate whether the dressmaker was responsible for commissioning the embroidery. Many early 19th century dresses were embroidered - whitework embroidery on lawn or muslin was particularly popular - so such commissions, for a time, must have formed part of dressmakers' repertoires. (Plate 69)

¹⁷ Part of this under-dress is a replica of the damaged original. The stitching tells us very little, therefore, but the colour and type of silk have been carefully matched to what survived of the original. It was restored by the East Midlands Area Museum Service conservation laboratory in the early 1970s

¹⁸ Tambour embroidery is done on openwork fabrics (net, gauze, muslin) using a hook which draws the thread up through the fabric making a chain stitch - rather like single crochet but worked through fabric. The fabric, meanwhile, is held taut on a drum-shaped frame - hence the name.



Plates 69 a, b and c
Yellow silk dress with over-dress of tambour
embroidered gauze 1820-3 (98.1955.2)

(Top) Complete dress.

(Middle) Detail of the sleeve, showing the
complicated cut of the cuff and the piped
edge.

(Bottom) Detail of the tambour embroidered
gauze fabric of the over-tunic and of the
padded satin rouleaux at the hem.





Plate 69 d and e

(Top) Detail of the under dress showing the lining and the cut of the skirt

(Bottom) Detail of the bodice front showing the van dycked satin trimming



8) Black silk dress, c.1829-30 (533.1951)

In many ways the style of this dress is similar to that of 7). It has the same high waist, the same puff sleeves, the same shape of skirt trimmed with padded rouleaux and even a van dyked collar. However the two dresses are of very different qualities.

This dress is very crudely sewn and seems to have been made in a hurry - perhaps as mourning wear for a sudden death. The bodice is lined with coarse fabric. The sleeves and collar are lined with something like crash which must originally have stiffened the sleeves into the fashionable full shape and made the collar stick out. There are tufts of gauze ribbon - now in very poor condition - on the shoulders. The skirt is unlined. The long full sleeves end in strange, deep, stiffened, laced cuffs which must have been a nightmare to put on and remove. Beneath one of the rouleaux there is a very obvious pleat where the fabric has been badly folded and stitched, and none of the rouleaux are straight or even. The garment has been made up of three different silks - perhaps parts of earlier dresses, or left over pieces - which have all been dyed black. When the dress was new the difference in the fabrics may not have been so obvious, (particularly as it was an evening dress which would have been worn in candle light) but with time the colours have faded and discoloured so that the differences are now marked. (Plate 70)



Plate 70 a. Black silk dress c.1829-30 (533.1951)

Detail of the front showing the velvet collar, flat pleated skirt and piped seam at the centre front.



Plates 70 b and c

(Left) Complete dress. This, like all the illustrations of this garment, shows the different colours the sections of dyed silk have taken on. In fact, the photographs exaggerate these differences in hue.

(Right) Detail of sleeve, showing the full shape that became fashionable c.1830, the ribbon tuft on the shoulder, and the strange, deep, laced cuffs.



Plates 70 d and e

(Top) Detail of the padded rouleaux at the hem, showing the way the fabric of the skirt has been pieced and the careless puckering and tuck under the applied rouleaux.

(Bottom) Detail of the inside of the hem, showing the way the fabric has been pieced and the crude stitching.

9) Printed muslin dress, c.1835 (427.1955)

This dress is made of roller-printed muslin, 31 inches in breadth. The bodice and hem are lined with muslin which was probably originally stiffened. The seams are piped, though the arrangement of seams is rather coarse, with the back seams being straight lines which form a diamond rather than the graceful curved seams which appear in more fashionable dresses. The front fastens with its original hooks and eyes. Tape loops are placed at the under arm seams. The sleeves are enormously full and would have been worn over sleeve puffs or frames, so the tapes were probably to hold these supports in position. It seems likely that, in wear, the arms passed through these tape loops which thus became shoulder straps. Most sleeve puffs have pairs of ties at the shoulder, and it seems probable that in this case these would have been tied on to the shoulder strap loops. The skirt is full (9 feet 6 inches in circumference at the hem) and tightly gathered, folded over and oversewn to the bodice as were most skirts of the early/mid-century. The dress is flimsy and has been carefully darned in a number of places. (Plate 71)



Plate 71 a

Printed muslin dress c.1835 (427.1955)

Complete dress.



Plate 71 b and c.

(Top) Detail of the back showing the diamond cut and piped seams.

(Bottom) Detail of the bodice showing the muslin lining, the original hook and eyelet hole fastening, the decorative curved, shaped tucks and the piping strengthening the edge of the fronts.



Plate 71 d, e and f

(Top) Detail of the waist band, showing the tight gathering of the skirt and a careful patch and a darn.

(Centre) Detail of the hem showing a band of muslin lining to give weight and bulk to the skirt.



(Bottom) Detail of a sleeve, showing the curved cut, the tightly gathered fullness on the shoulder and the piped shoulder seam



10) Dress of olive green silk, c.1840 (247.1966)

The bodice of this dress is fully lined and has bones at the centre front and back. It fastens at the back with hooks and worked eyelet holes. It is hand-stitched using a neat, firm back stitch. Many of the seams in this dress contain piping. In her 1894 book Jeanette Davis explains:-

'When all seams were hand made, there is no doubt that, however careful the worker and close and firm the stitching, there were difficulties to contend with in the shape of materials and lining, and in the way the required curving of the seams would run at every imaginable angle across warp and weft, that would at times prove insurmountable, and make seams to which the "pull" of the stitch would give an appearance very far from pleasing to the eye --- All the seams where this "pull" of the stitching were likely to show were corded ---

¹⁹

The sleeves are narrow and are fully lined with a soft, twilled cotton, less firmly woven than that lining the bodice. Both under-arm sections are badly stained and rotted by perspiration. Two strips of trimming decorate the bodice and are punctuated at intervals with marks of stitches which probably held decorative buttons in place. They may have been green glass, like the buttons that still close the wrist openings. The skirt is composed of seven breadths of 18 inch wide silk, and is lined with glazed cotton that has lost all its original stiffness. The hem is edged with brush braid. The skirt seams are raw and over-stitched. At the waist the skirt is folded over, gathered into what we now call 'organ pleats' and oversewn to the bodice.

'When straight (ungored) skirts were in vogue, and six or seven breadths of material had to be "stocked" or set into the waist belt, the value of the correct gathering stitch was very apparent. The stitch, longer on the face than on the back, draws the material up into distinct ridges, making it much easier for the worker to dispose of it neatly, securely and regularly ---

²⁰

A matching, fully lined shoulder cape, cut with rounded shaping at the shoulders, completes this outfit.

(Plate 72)

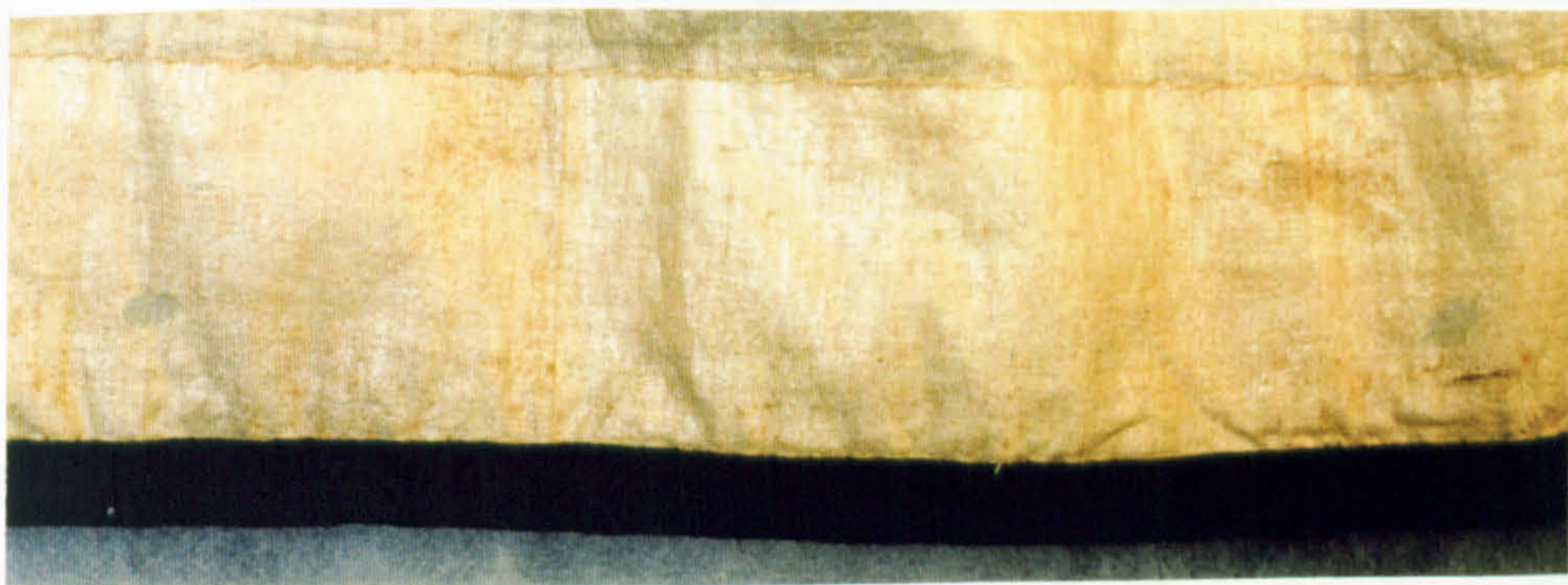


Plate 72 a. Dress of olive green silk c.1840 (247.1966) Detail of hem showing lined skirt and brush braid edging

¹⁹ Op cit, Davis, (1894), p.18

²⁰ Ibid, p.103



Plate 72 b, c and d

(Top right) Complete dress.

(Top left) Detail of sleeve, showing small pleats at the elbow, piped seam and original button at cuff.

(Bottom) Shoulder cape. Note the curved shoulder seams.





Plate 72 e and f

(Top) Detail of back showing original hook and eyelet hole fastening (the hook side is boned for strength), curved, piped back seams and silk rotting under the arms from perspiration stains.

(Bottom) Detail showing fully lined bodice and skirt, boned front, tightly gathered skirt and method of attaching it to the bodice.

.11) Dress of pink printed muslin, 1845-50 (157.1981.1)

This dress came from a farming family of Anstey in Leicestershire. It is made of cheap, resist-printed muslin, 30 inches in width. It follows the fashionable shape, with a bodice fastening at the back with hooks and eyelet holes and a low, pointed waist, trimmed with ruching. This sort of decoration was called 'gauging' and Eliza Ann Cory described how it was done. The numbers refer to diagrams in her book.

The bodice front was cut wide, then the dressmaker had to

'trace a line to mark the middle, and proceed to run the body, leaving a piece plain at each end the length from 3 to 9, leave the thread long enough to remain without drawing, until sufficient runnings have been made to reach to B, they may be placed according to taste, from a quarter to half an inch apart; have ready a stiff brown paper pattern of the front, with the plait firmly sewn, and tack the middle of the body to the middle of the paper, up from 8 to 6, drawing it up gradually till it fits from line 12 on one side to line 12 on the other, carry the fullness regularly up to the shoulder from 5 along to 4; tack everywhere round the outside of the pattern; have ready the lining, and remove it on to that, tacking the two tracing lines together to make it fit --²¹.

In the 1870s R Monroe described how important it was to do the running neatly *'the beauty of this trimming depends on the lines being clearly defined and of extreme accuracy'*²². The fact that Mrs Cory, in her very simple booklet, gave instructions for such a bodice, shows how common a design this was.

There are bones at the front, back and sides. These project from their casings. *'They must be loose from the body for about three quarters of an inch at the top to prevent their sticking out and showing on the outside'*²³. The sleeves are slightly pouched and button at the wrists, unlike 12) which has more fashionable flounced sleeves. This is a much more practical dress, worn by a working woman who could not have done her job with trailing sleeves. It has a full skirt with three tiers of flounces, tightly gathered on to the bodice (cf. 10)). In most respects it is a cheap version of 12), probably made by a country dressmaker. However, it is included here because it is an example of how garments could be customised. Under the frills which edge the triangle of gauged decoration at the bodice front are two buttoned slits. This dress was worn by a woman who was breast feeding. (Plate 73)

²¹ Op cit, Cory, (1849) p. 17

²² Op cit, Monroe, (1879), p.35

²³ Op cit, Grenfell, (1892), p.67



Plates 73 a and b

11) Dress of pink printed muslin 1845-50
(157.1981.1)

(Top) Complete dress.

(Bottom) Detail of bodice showing lining, boning and breast openings. The dress puckers untidily at the top of the bone at the centre front.



12) White embroidered muslin dress, c.1850 (70.1957)

This dress was worn by a young woman of about 20 who later married into one of Leicester's foremost manufacturing families and became Mrs Josiah Gimson. White dresses were considered particularly suitable summer wear for young girls. It is very similar in style to 11), but its wearer came from a very different social class, and, despite its apparent simplicity, this was an expensive garment.

It is a full skirted muslin dress, with an exaggeratedly low waist and triple flounces on the skirt. These are tambour-embroidered in white, probably professionally, and apparently to order for this particular outfit, as only the visible areas are worked. Again, the dressmaker was probably responsible for commissioning the embroidery. A short frilled matching cape was also provided. It has not been photographed in situ as it conceals the line of the dress. The bodice is mounted on strong white cotton. The dressmaker found it necessary to piece the front lining sections - probably to save fabric. A tie is provided inside the bodice front. Its purpose is unclear, but it was probably intended to anchor the low point of the bodice to the wearer's corset to stop it riding up when she bent or sat. The shoulder and waist seams are piped. The bodice fitted closely and fastens at the back with a long row of hooks and eyelet holes.

It is a complicated dress in that the bodice had to fit neatly, even though it must have come down well below the wearer's natural waist. The eyelet holes are all hand-worked and three seams are piped. Tiered flounces require considerable accuracy to apply, particularly on a very full skirt (this one is 11 feet in circumference, which means that the un-gathered flounces were considerably longer). Muslin is loosely woven, frays easily and is awkward to work as it tends to pull out of shape and cling to itself.

Such dresses were high maintenance. They were worn over layers of stiffened petticoats and touched the floor all the way round. They got soiled and trodden on - this one has been darned round the hem in several places and is grubby. (Plate 74)



Plates 74 a and b
Dress of white embroidered muslin c.1850
(70.1957)

(Top) Complete dress.

(Bottom) Detail of flounce showing tambour embroidery applied only to the visible areas of the dress.





Plate 74 c

Bodice, showing the heavy cotton lining, the extra-low point at the front and the tape to anchor it to the corset, the original hook and eyelet hole fastening, the curved seams and pieced lining.

13) Evening dress of warp-printed silk, originally late 1850s ((1122.1951)

This is a two piece dress. The bodice is short sleeved and boned, with the fashionable 'V' shaped front, and is lined with strong white cotton. It is beautifully and intricately cut, and the two back sections are made so as to form a perfect 'V' when the hook and eyelet hole fastening is closed. It is unaltered.

However, it is probable that the skirt of the dress was re-made some time in the 1890s. The full skirts of mid-century dresses contained yards of fabric and so were easy to remake. The short sleeved, high waisted bodice (waists got higher in the late fifties and sixties) was fairly similar to the fashionable shape for evening bodices in the 1890s. The skirt is slightly trained, partly pleated and partly gored. 1890s skirts were gored. The bodice is entirely hand stitched, but the long skirt seams are machined. Two sewing machines have been used - one a lock stitch, the other a chain stitch - suggesting that the garment may have been altered twice. (Plate 75)



Plate 75 a
Evening dress of warp printed silk, late 1850s
(1122.1951)

Skirt on hanger, showing gored shape and slight train.



Plates 75 b and c

(Top) Bodice showing curved seams, careful cut and elaborate sleeves with blonde lace trimming.

(Bottom) Detail showing lining, seams, and one of the carefully cut overlapping points that makes up the bodice back.

14) Beige silk wedding dress, 1864 (382.1976)

This dress was worn by a lady in Market Harborough. 19th century wedding dresses were often coloured, and would later have been worn as 'best' dresses. This one is made of a coarse, prickly, tabby woven fabric; it is probably a silk/wool mixture but it feels like horse hair.

This dress is made in a one piece. Up to the 1840s dresses were made with bodice and skirt joined. Both one and two piece dresses were made in the 1850s and subsequent decades, though after the mid 1860s two-piece dresses predominate. This garment differs little from dresses of the 1850s except that the fullness of the skirt is arranged in flat pleats with extra fullness behind, rather than in tight gathers evenly distributed all the way round. This dress is of interest because the sleeves are unusually full - an example of a dressmaker adapting a fashionable garment to her client's taste. Such adaptations are quite rare - most women seem to have followed fashion slavishly.

The bodice is lined with cotton but the sleeves are unlined as is the skirt. The seams are all back stitched but are so beautifully neat that the work could easily be mistaken for machine stitching. The bodice is darted to create the shaping at the front - as were many 1860s dresses, unlike earlier garments where the shaping was achieved by seaming. The neck line and armhole seams are piped. The bodice fastens at the front with hooks and eyes which are covered by a row of decorative white buttons. The bodice and skirt are held together in wear at the front by a neat arrangement of horizontal and vertical hooks and eyes. The skirt is flat pleated at the front and tightly gathered at the centre back, and consists of five and a bit breadths of 24 inch wide fabric, making a hem 11 feet 6 inches in circumference. (Plate 76)

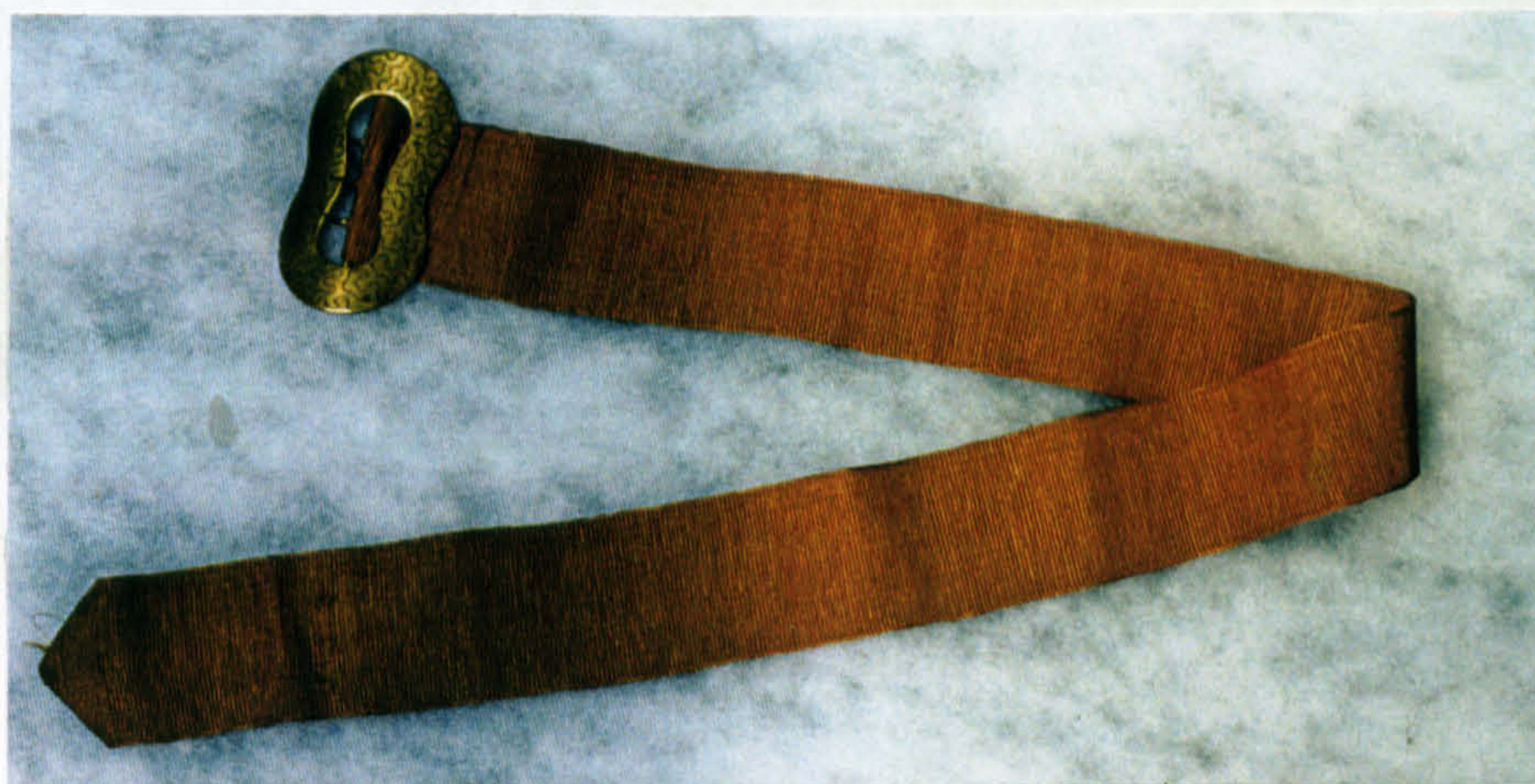


Plate 76 a. Beige silk wedding dress 1864 (382.1976)

Matching belt, believed to be original.



Plates 76 b and c

(Top) Complete dress on a hanger.

(Bottom) Detail of the back showing curved seams, dropped shoulder seams and flat box pleats at the waist.





Plates 76 d and e

(Top) Detail of the unusually shaped sleeve and piped shoulder seam

(Bottom) Detail of the lining and waist band showing the arrangement of hooks and eyes which held the heavy skirt in place at the front.



15) Blue and green striped silk taffeta dress, c.1865 (97.1935)

This dress was donated to Leicester Museum by the Cunningtons²⁴. It is a typical example of how dressmakers adapted the fashionable style of the early and mid 1860s to incorporate the 'back interest' that was in vogue at the end of the decade. This is a standard two-piece 1860s dress with a separate 'tablier', made like an apron, but worn at the back.

The bodice is darted at the front like 14). It is lined with cotton and there are bones at the sides, front, and in two of the four front darts. A small dart has been inserted in the lining at the centre back to make it sit properly - an ad hoc solution that marks this dress as coming from a mediocre maker. The seams are coarsely over-sewn. The trimming is roughly tacked into position with dark thread and was probably added later when the dress was re-vamped with a tablier. The main dress is neatly hand sewn with light coloured thread which shows on the right side as top stitching. The skirt is full and contains ten vertical seams, though the breadths are not all the full width of the fabric (19 inches). It is pleated and full at the back. There is a large pocket in coarse cotton and a small watch or sovereign pocket made of the same silk as the dress. Brush braid is oversewn to the hem - an unusual solution as brush braid was there to wear out when the hem brushed the ground. It was replaced several times during the life of the garment, so it is usually easier to remove. The tablier is simply made, with crude gathers, and is unlined. (Plate 77)



Plate 77 a

Blue and green striped silk dress

Bodice showing lining, boning, the crude stitches that attach the trimming and the way the sleeve is set in.

²⁴ See Introduction, footnote 8



Plates 77 b and c

(Top) Complete dress.

(Bottom) Back view, showing tablier in position.





Plates 77 d and e

(Top) Detail of the tablier.

(Bottom) Bodice, showing the lining and the coarse stitching which holds the fringe in place, the side bone and front boned darts and the centre back dart put in to make the lining lie smoothly.

16) Dress of brown and black striped silk, c.1868 (1059.1967)

This dress was probably worn contemporaneously with 15), but is an example of a garment made in the latest style rather than one adapted to it.

The bodice is long and incorporates a trimmed basque. The skirt is fully lined and trimmed. The sleeves are trimmed with a pinked frill - pinking is relatively uncommon at this date. The bodice is machine stitched using a chain stitch machine, but the sleeves are set in by hand. The skirt seams are hand sewn, and the trimming is tacked on top - the tacking stitches go right through the lining. The silk is still quite narrow - a full breadth is 31 ½ inches wide. The dress is fully lined. It was usual, according to Mrs Grenfell's Dress Making, a Technical Manual for Teachers of 1892, to use as linings, calico for the bodies of washing gowns, sateen for thin materials and silesia for others; skirts were to be lined with glazed cotton or linen. (Plate 78)



Plate 78 a
Dress of brown and black striped silk c.1868
(1059.1967)

Complete dress.



Plates 78 b and c

(Top) Detail of the bodice showing the lining, part of the diamond back, the basque, and neatly finished seams and tailors' button holes

(Bottom) Detail of a sleeve showing the curved cut, dropped shoulder seam, unusually shaped cuff and kilted inner trimming.





Plates 78 d, e and f

(Top left) Front of the skirt showing pinked trimmings

(Top right) Detail of the lined skirt showing the lines of tacking which hold the trimmings in place and the brush braid at hem.

(Bottom) Detail of the waist band showing the tight gathering at the centre back to create a fashionable line.



17) Wedding dress of lilac and grey silk, c.1875 (C22.1985)

The bride who wore this dress was probably in the latter stages of mourning - grey and lilac were both considered 'half mourning' colours. This outfit is most beautifully cut and made.

It is entirely machine made, using a lock stitch machine, and is a typical example of the very complex styles that became fashionable in the 1870s as the sewing machine speeded up garment production. The cut of the bodice and basque is intricate, and enables the bodice to sit neatly over the fashionably full skirt. This skirt differed from its 1860s predecessor.

*'The actual crinoline is now given up or nearly so, but ladies, generally speaking, wear the tournure Duchesse of fine horsehair, disposed in several flutings to keep up the full basques and retroussis of modern costume'*²⁵

The bodice fastens at the front with hooks and eyelet holes concealed beneath a triple row of hand-covered buttons, and a petersham band attached to the inside back fastens firmly at the front, and ensures that the tight bodice stays in place and does not ride up. Both bodice and skirt are elaborately trimmed and both have bands of 'kilted' lilac silk - probably done on one of the new kilting machines. The ruched decoration is hand gathered and tacked into place. Both bodice and skirt are fully lined - the bodice with cotton, the skirt (and each of the separate flounces) with stiffened muslin - the book muslin that Ms Monroe (Practical Dressmaking, 1879) believed was inferior to leno for lining trimmings..

The sleeves fit neatly and tightly. Like the sleeves on many Victorian dresses they are cut curved, with little fabric to spare at the elbow or sleeve head, making movement difficult. Ladies were not expected to lift or carry or reach or stretch. Girls did comparatively little exercise, and it is clear from surviving garments that few women developed much muscle in their upper arms. Making such sleeves was tricky, as Mrs Woodgate Low explained in 1893:-

*'The greatest care should always be taken in putting sleeves together. They should never be raised from the table whilst they are being tacked together; if they are they will cause the under seam to wring over on the upper; the inside seams should be tacked together first, getting them perfectly level at the top of the sleeve --- Tack as far as the elbow, turn to the bottom of the sleeve and tack up this also, as far as the elbow, using whatever fulness[sic] may be left to gather into the elbow'*²⁶.

Sleeves had changed shape by 1893, but the care needed to make them fit neatly had not. (Plate 79)

²⁵ The Milliners', Dressmakers' and Warehouseman's Gazette, November 1872

²⁶ Op cit, Low (1893) pp.10-11



Plates 79 a and b
Wedding dress of lilac and grey silk c.1875
(C.22.1985)

(Top) Complete dress.

(Bottom) Detail of the bodice showing the
piped shoulder seam.





Plates 79 c, d and e

(Top) Detail of the bodice showing the lining, kilted trimming and delicate shaping.

(Right) Detail of a sleeve showing the kilted cuff.

(Bottom) Skirt, showing how the flounces are lined and set.





Plates 79 f and g

(Top) Bodice front showing the triple rows of covered buttons and the double darts at the front.

(Bottom) Skirt, showing the lining, waistband, and organ pleating which gives the bustle effect at the centre back.



18) Wedding[?] outfit of nun's veiling and silk, c.1880-1 (OS583.1951)

This dress was almost certainly a wedding or bridesmaid's outfit. The fashionable shape has changed since 1875, and though the main interest is still at the back, the overall shape is much slimmer and more fitted. This dress would have been worn over a small bustle and rigid corsets - as dresses became more fitted, corsets became longer and tighter. This is both a very complicated and a very high quality piece of work, using fine fabrics and elaborate trimmings.

It is a two piece dress with a long bodice and a trained skirt. The bodice is fully lined; there are channels to fit bones on each of the inner seams but the bones are mostly missing. A petersham band, (as in 17)) holds the bodice in place at the waist. The length of the bodice is exaggerated by loops of trimming at its hem, and the upper part of the skirt is made of silk so that the lower bodice slides over it smoothly. It fastens at the front with a combination of hand made buttons (some of which are missing) and hooks and eyes. The skirt is very heavy and is attached to a coarse webbing waist band which is secured at the centre back with three heavy-duty hooks and eyes. The bustle panel is lined with stiffened muslin and there is a stiffened muslin flounce at the hem. Most of the garment is machine made, but the sleeves are set in by hand and the trimming is tacked into position. The kilted trimmings were probably created by machine.

While this garment looks splendid in wear, it relies heavily on elaborate trimming and fine material. It incorporates a huge amount of work, but is nothing like so beautifully cut as 17). (Plate 80)

Plate 80 a. Wedding outfit of nun's veiling and silk c.1880-1 (OS583.1951)

Detail of the kilted flounces at the hem.





Plates 80 b and c

(Top) Complete dress.

(Bottom) Detail of the bodice showing the petersham band, lining, hand made buttons and the loose swathes of trimming round the hips.





Plates 80 d and e

(Top) Back neck, showing the trimming, dropped shoulder seams and armhole seam piping.

(Bottom) Detail of a cuff showing kilting and lace.





Plates 80 f and g

(Top) Detail showing the stiffened muslin panel at the centre back which enhanced the fullness of the skirt.

(Bottom) Detail of the balayeuse - the frill which trimmed the skirt hem on the underside.

19) Gold satin dress, c.1886 (149.1983)

Within five years the fashionable shape had changed again. Waists were shorter, and though the bustle was still worn the line was fussier and more bulky. This dress bears a maker's label for Mrs Blakesley of 56, King Street, Leicester. Makers' labels become increasingly common in the 1880s.

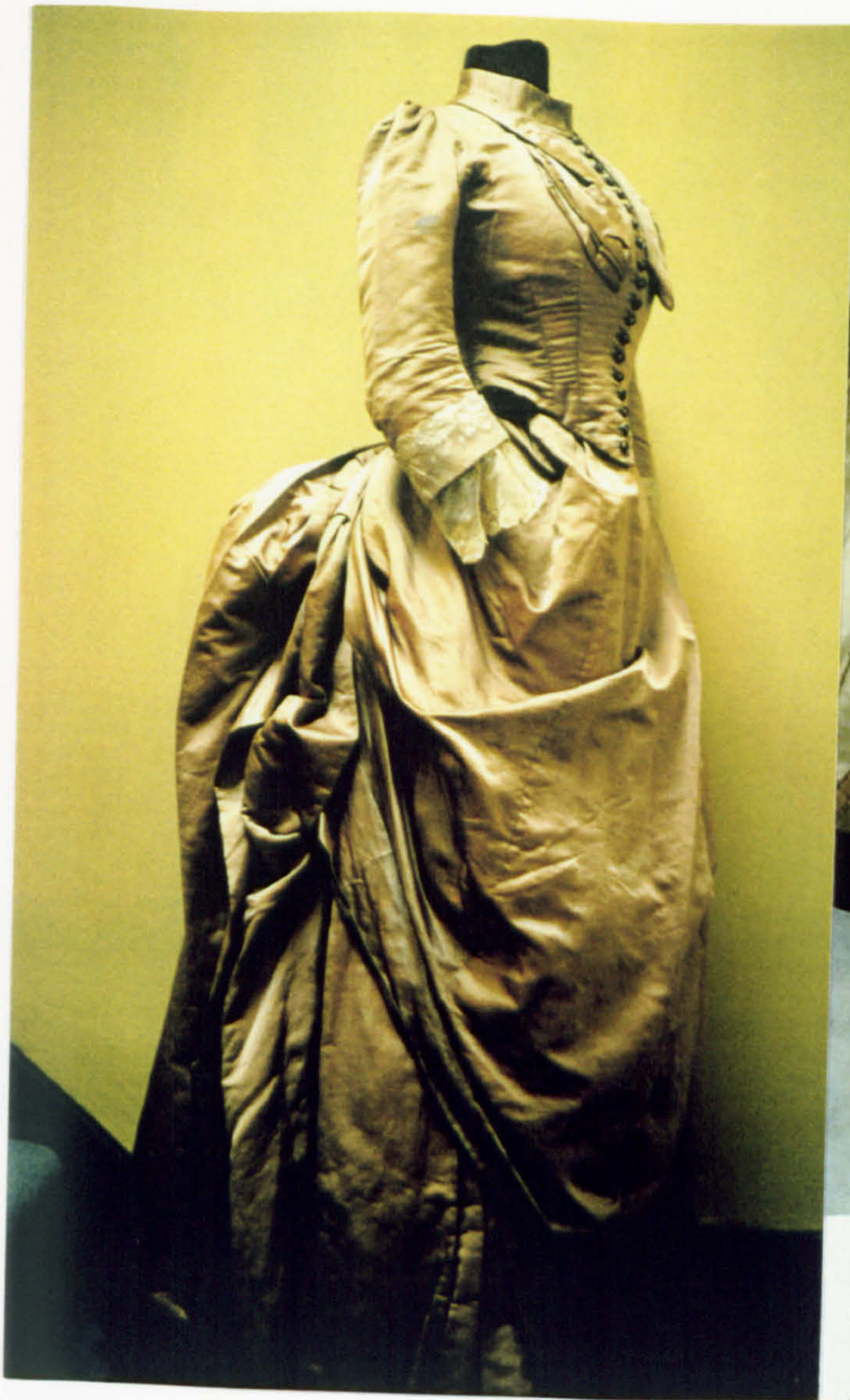
Both bodice and skirt are fully lined with khaki cotton, and the bodice is boned at the sides and front. The petersham anchoring band bears the maker's name. The bodice has a small basque which is lined with silk to enable it to sit smoothly over the skirt - cotton would have tended to catch. It fastens at the front with buttons and exceptionally neat, hand-made button holes. The skirt is heavy and cumbersome and is attached to a sturdy cotton tape waist band. It is partially pleated, and the pleats are held in place by being tacked to tapes on the inside. This garment is entirely machine made, including the sleeve seams, except for some of the trimming which is tacked in place.

R Monroe, in Practical Dressmaking gave advice on the treatment of kilting that Mrs Blakesley chose to ignore. Stitches to hold poor quality silk, she wrote,

'will betray, by a depression on the right side of the flounce, the artifice which keeps the pleats regular above and allows them to open below, so that it is then advisable to carry the catch threads behind in a series of curves and permit the pleats to spring open from the deepest to the shallowest parts of these waves'²⁷.

Mrs Blakesley's pleats gape and flatten. The dressmaker interpreted a fashionable design - almost certainly using a paper pattern - but the overall effect is clumsy and inelegant. Mrs Blakesley's fitter, to quote Mr White of Ipswich '*lacked style*' - or failed to persuade her client that heavy gold satin was the wrong fabric for her chosen design. (Plate 81)

²⁷ Op cit, Monroe (1879) pp. 26-27



Plates 81 a, b and c. Gold satin dress c.1886
(149.1983)

(Top left) Complete dress.

(Top right) Detail showing maker's label, lining, seaming and the trimming of the bodice front.

(Bottom) Detail of skirt showing the tapes which hold the pleats in position.





Plates 81 d and e

(Top) Detail of the bodice showing the shaping for the bust, the front darts, the petersham band and the method of applying 'bachelor's buttons'.

(Bottom) Detail of the tailor's button holes at the bodice front. Tailor's button holes involve the removal of a snippet of fabric. These are especially well made.



20) Red silk dress c.1885 (C.2.1944)

Two-piece dress of red corded silk trimmed with red silk net. Red is an unusual colour for a dress of this period and fashion writers like 'Sylvia' and 'Myra' would have described it as vulgar. The bodice is lined with cream corded silk and has a bone at the centre back. It has been let out at the fronts and the alteration is disguised by swathes of the red silk net. The seams are neatly scalloped and oversewn by hand though the main seams are all machine stitched. The tails of the bodice are weighted. The petersham anchoring band bears the name '*Leicester Dress Cutting Establishment, Leamington House, Market Street, Leicester*'²⁸, but in fact there is nothing unusual about the way the dress is cut.

The skirt is elaborately draped, kilted and interlined with red cotton and stiffened muslin and is surprisingly heavy. The design is asymmetrical. Tape and elastic ties on the inside enabled it to be tied back into a fashionable trained shape. A complicated arrangement of horizontal and vertical hooks and eyes anchors the skirt in place and attaches it to the bodice. A further hook and loop doubles the back trimming to accentuate the fullness of the back.. (Plate 82)



Plate 82 a
Red silk dress c.1885
(C.2.1944)

View of the bodice, showing
the petersham band which
bears the firm's name.

²⁸ The Leicester Dress Cutting House does not appear in any of the Leicester directories of the 1880s, though there was a Scientific Dress Cutting Association at Victoria Chambers, Gallowtree gate, in 1888, according to Wright's Directory

Plate 82 b and c

(Top) Complete dress

(Bottom) Detail of the bodice showing how it has been let out at the front, the scalloped seams, the back bone herring boned in place and the covered weights inside the tails.





Plates 82 d and e

(Top) Detail of the back of the bodice, showing the curved seams and the bustle effect at the back.

(Bottom) Detail of the skirt showing the cotton lining, the tape and elastic ties and part of the arrangement of hooks and eyes that anchored bodice and skirt together.





Plate 82 f

The skirt showing details of the silk net trimming and the hook that enabled the back ruche to be doubled.

21) Purple silk dress c.1895 (671.1962.4)

Two-piece dress of purple ribbed silk made for a Mrs Cooper at Adderley's department store. Adderley's workroom turned out fine work. This is a beautifully made dress of deceptively simple appearance, made to look like a tailored costume over a blouse. Costumes or blouses and skirts were the accepted uniform for working women at this date and blouse making became a speciality of many small dressmakers. However, as a married woman, Mrs Cooper would not have worked, and this dress is of a higher quality than most working women could have afforded.

Both bodice and skirt are fully lined with glazed cotton and the bodice lining also incorporated bands of purple jap silk. The seams are cut with '*curved scallops*' as Jeanette Davis recommended²⁹. The bloused front gives an illusion of looseness but the pleats are actually outside the fitted bodice which contains eleven bones. It has a 22 inch waist. The 'blouse' is made of heavy duchesse satin covered in machine lace. The collar is also lined and stiffened. The bodice fastens with an alternating row of hooks and eyes. This method of fastening is still sometimes used on theatrical dress; it avoids any possibility of the garment coming undone but is very tricky to do up and undo. The sleeves are fashionably full on the shoulders though the sleeve lining fits closely all the way up the arm. The fullness is created by clever cutting and pleating - there is no additional piecing to create the shape.

The skirt has front and side gores and is cleverly cut at the back, incorporating two gores cut on the cross which fit in half way down the back opening, and having part of the side gore pleated so that it hangs on the cross but lies on the straight of the fabric at the waist as it has to, or it will pull out of shape. It is a great deal more complex than any of Mme Schild's New Skirts and How to Cut Them (1893) or Mrs Lowther Knight's '*Alpha skirts*' (1896)³⁰

The garment is trimmed with purple braid the design of which owes something to art nouveau. It is stitched on by hand, as is the lace on the 'blouse' though the garment is otherwise entirely machine-made as was usual by this date. The hem is neatly lined with brush braid, carefully applied, not tacked in place as was the norm. (Plate 83)

²⁹ See Chapter five p.218

³⁰ Ibid pp. 206 and 215



Plates 83 a, b and c.

(Top left) Complete dress

(Top right) Back view showing details of the braid. Unfortunately the clever arrangement of gores is hidden in the folds.

(Bottom) Bodice showing the pleated 'blouse' effect front and rigidly boned inner bodice.





Plates 83 d, e and f. (Top) Bodice lining showing Adderley's name tape which is partly obscured by a tape skirt hanger, the glazed cotton lining and the scalloped side seams. (Below left) Detail of the self-closing hooks which fasten the skirt. (Below right) Detail of the alternating hook and eye front fastening.



22) Wedding dress, 1910-11 (537.1961)

Wedding dress of pale blue soft silk crepe trimmed with insertions of machine embroidery, coloured lace and braid, all in pale pinks and blues. This dress was worn by Miss S E Anderson at her wedding to Mr P J Sinclair on January 11th 1911.

The fashionable shape had changed and become columnar - the skirt is actually quite narrow. The bodice front, however, has the same 'mono-bosom' effect as was worn in the 1890s, and the neck is wired to make it stand. The dress is lined throughout with pale blue cotton. Although the sleeves look loose, the lining is actually tight fitting. The bodice has complicated draping front and back and two loose panels at the sides which are gathered in at the hem with bands of embroidery. The garment is embroidered with rows of french knots which were a very popular type of design at this date.

This garment has been conserved prior to display and some of the embroidery, particularly on the shoulders, is protected by silk net. (Plate 84)

Plates 84 a and b Detail of the bodice front and back showing the machine lace, embroidery and braid trimming, the hand worked french knots and the cross-over fastenings.





Plates 84 c, d and e (Top) Complete dress, side and front views showing the columnar shape, side panels and loose over-sleeves (Below) Detail of the machine-embroidered motif and tassels which gather in the side panels





Plates 84 f, g, h and i (Top left) Detail of cuff and machine embroidery. The museum conservator has covered this with silk lace for protection as it is loosely stitched and beginning to fray (Top right) Detail of the inside of the sleeve. Despite its loose appearance it in fact fitted very tightly and the lines are fading due to perspiration as a result. This dress was nothing like as comfortable to wear as it appears (Below left) Detail of the inside of the bodice showing the cotton lining, tacking stitches which hold the trimming in place and the under-arm dress preservers (Below right) Detail of the hem showing stitches the coarse floss silk which makes the french knots on the outer surface

Conclusion

A dressmaker who was apprenticed at fourteen and continued working into her sixties, at any stage in our period, would, in the course of her working life have had to learn at least four different ways of cutting and assembling garments. If she was apprenticed after 1850 she would have seen more changes of style and would also have had to learn how to work with a sewing machine. Even after paper patterns became generally available her clients would have expected her to be able to adapt and customise them. She would also have been expected to find out what colours and trimmings were in vogue by reading magazines and visiting wholesalers. She would have needed to understand the properties of different fabrics and to advise on their use and she would have had to keep up with the endless changes of fabric types and names. To attract a good class of customer she had to have genteel manners and to dress respectably. To be successful she had to have a good eye and an ability to judge what colours and styles would suit her different customers. It is likely that they heeded her advice at least as much as that of the fashion journalists and writers whose works they may have seen. Our dressmaker would also have needed to be diplomatic, persuasive and patient, as well as hardworking, especially if she numbered many ladies like Mrs Fenton amongst her clientele. And, if she ran her own business, she needed a good grasp of figures and an ability to calculate. Dressmaking was creative, frustrating but potentially satisfying. In the next chapter we will look at some of the women who went into the trade.

Chapter seven

Dressmakers in the census

*'They fight by shuffling papers; they have bright dead alien eyes;
They look at our labour and laughter as a tired man looks at flies --'*
(G K Chesterton *The Secret People* 1915)

Dressmaking was very labour intensive. The dresses Anna Morrell ordered from her Selby dressmaker, cost only a fraction of the price of the ones Lady Langham had made in Northampton (see Appendix two), but they took almost as much time and effort to make. It took an army of needlewomen to keep the ladies of Victorian Britain respectably and fashionably attired. Part of our quest is to find out just how large an army. The best way to discover the numbers of women who worked in the millinery and dressmaking branches of the needle trades is to examine census returns. Trades directories give lists of dressmaking firms but they give no indication of the numbers of people those firms employed and they tend to under-represent the numbers of women working on their own account.

The surest source of this information is the census. It is to our advantage that 19th century authorities were obsessed with the compilation of surveys and statistics. Nonetheless, any attempt to use census data - especially for a survey of women's employment - is fraught with problems. It is time-consuming to collect, parts of the returns have faded into illegibility, there are problems of interpretation, and part-time and occasional employment - exactly the characteristics of some work in dressmaking - often went unrecorded¹. However, on the positive side, data gleaned from the census returns gives us much more than statistics. It tells us a great deal about the families and circumstances in which dressmakers lived.

A knowledge of local historical geography further helps us to 'place' individuals. For example, in 19th century Leicester, addresses in Highfields, in Belgrave, on London Road, or in the area around New Walk were respectable. Firms on High Street or High Cross Street, or in the Market Place would have been patronised by the 'carriage' trade, but Gallowtree Gate served a working class market. Dressmakers in the crowded streets of St Margaret's ward or in the courts and yards off old Charles Street² would also have served a less than fashionable clientele.

¹ Higgs, Edward, 'Women, Occupation and Work', *History Workshop Journal* 23 (1987)

² All demolished in the 1960s.

Not until 1841 - the fifth census - were detailed records taken of the people enumerated. The first four censuses provided little more than a head count. In 1841 the enumerators recorded names, addresses, occupations, places of birth and gave some indication of the respondents' ages³. (Plate 85) By 1851 the system had been refined, and respondents were also asked about their marital status and to give their exact age and details of their relationship to the head of the household. An analysis of entries for women who described themselves as dressmakers or milliners, therefore, enables us not only to see how many people were employed in the trade in a given area, but to know their ages, whether they were married, widowed or single, whether they had children, how old those children were who still lived at home and what their occupations were. It tells us how many dressmakers lived with their employers, how many boarded with other people, how many lived with their birth or marital families and how many lived alone. It indicates how many had absentee husbands or illegitimate children, and how many - at a given point in time - were inmates of hospital, prison, workhouse or lunatic asylum. And, perhaps most importantly of all, it enables us to make some estimate of the social status of individuals engaged in the trade. This is here defined largely by the occupation of the women's fathers, husbands or other male relatives, and to a lesser extent by where they lived and how many people they employed.

Places and problems

For the purpose of this thesis these analyses have been made in respect of Leicester, Melton Mowbray, Sidmouth and Ulverston, for 1841, 1861 and 1881. They have been chosen because they were very different types of places.

Leicester was an old established county town, but by the mid 19th century it was also a manufacturing centre with a wide variety of trades available to women - notably hosiery, shoe making, cigar making, elastic web weaving and warehouse work. The population grew enormously in the course of the century, from +/-15,000 in 1801 to over 122,000 in 1881 - an eight-fold increase and nearly three times the national average. This growth was caused as much by immigration of workers from the surrounding countryside, from other midlands counties and from further afield, as by an expanding birth rate, but most of the incomers were young and brought or produced young families. Leicester in the 19th century had a predominantly youthful, and predominantly working class, population, but it also had its fair share of wealthy manufacturers and old established county families. It was a thriving place, but not especially fashion-conscious.

³ Ages were rounded down to the nearest five.

Melton Mowbray is in Leicestershire, fifteen miles north-east of Leicester, and ten miles west of Oakham. It was a market town, served by a canal and, from 1846, by the railway, and was a local administrative centre. The Union workhouse was in Melton and it was one of the polling places for the northern division of Leicestershire. There is a fine mediaeval church and a beautiful five arched bridge across the River Soar. The town has strong links with the hunting fraternity and the Earl of Wilton had a hunting lodge there. Consequently, for at least part of the year it was a fashionable centre, so that - according to White's 1847 directory -

'The town is thronged with nobility and gentry during the fox hunting season, which commences the first week in November and closes about the end of March with the Croxton Park Races'

Sidmouth, in Devon, was a small place in the 19th century, but it was also highly fashionable. It began to develop from an obscure fishing village into an exclusive watering place in the 1790s. In 1803 there were just 1,252 inhabitants in 350 houses. The town's character changed when, a few years later, Thomas Jenkins inherited a large estate in the area and sold most of it

'-- in several lots, - a circumstance considered likely to be highly favourable to the increase of the number of residences, a small freehold now being easily attainable by those of the nobility or gentry who may wish to make Sidmouth a place of abode'.

By 1821 Sidmouth had 2,747 inhabitants in 480 dwellings and the number was increasing. Many of the new houses were Sidmouth's famous 'cottages' - large dwellings built in various 'rustic' styles as 'cottages ornees' for wealthy, often titled, people, whose presence gave Sidmouth its very individual character. Even those who could not afford to live there saw Sidmouth as a select place to spend a few weeks or months in the summer.

Ulverston in Lancashire was a small town, but the 'capital' of the Furness district⁵. For centuries it could only be reached, at low tide, across the treacherous sands of Morecombe Bay. The coming of the railway made Ulverston more accessible, but despite the growing popularity of the Lake District with 19th century visitors, it remained provincial and somewhat backward-looking well into the 20th century. The town served a large, sparsely populated, rural hinterland of poor upland farms. There was mining in the area and the town acquired an iron works in the 1870s which was a major employer of labour. The population doubled between 1841 and 1881 from 5352 to 10,008.

⁴ Mogridge, T H A Descriptive Sketch of Sidmouth, comprising its antient and modern history, c.1836, p.2

⁵ Since 1974 it has been part of Cumbria.

The census provides a picture of society and its component families at a given time on a given day. But people's occupational lives were as fluid as their family relationships. In dressmaking in particular, women dropped in and out of work as their family circumstances changed. Before marriage they worked full time, and in the early days of their married life they might continue to work on a full or part time basis. They might take time out when their children were born, or return to work if their husband became ill or unemployed. Many women who appear in trades directories under '*milliners and dressmakers*' seem to have gone out of business very quickly. For example, of the 18 women who appear as milliner/dressmakers in the 1822-3 Leicester directory, only 5 were among the 39 women who practised the trade in 1828-9 and none of them were still in business in 1835⁶. A hundred and fifteen milliner/dressmakers are listed in Drake's Leicester Directory for 1861; 25 of them were still trading in 1867; by 1870 only 13 remained⁷. These statistics do not necessarily imply that all the remaining firms went bankrupt. No doubt some of the proprietors married and changed their names but continued to trade, others moved to new areas, some went to work for other people, some retired and some died.

Any analysis of census data is problematic. A surprising number of the returns have faded to illegibility which means no analysis can be complete. Many people were unsure of their age or chose to lie about it - in a period when few forms had to be filled in, it was, perhaps, easier to forget when you were born. Enumerators were advised to make intelligent guesses when respondents could not, or would not, divulge their ages. It is difficult to be sure how many of those women who described themselves as married, but whose husbands were not with them when the census was taken, were alone because their husbands were absent on legitimate business and how many were abandoned wives. Illegitimate children are particularly difficult to identify - a parent with their unmarried daughter living at home with her illegitimate offspring could easily conceal the child's parenthood by referring to it simply as their 'grandchild' - the surname implying that they were looking after their son's child. This was probably the situation in the household at 24, Mill Street, Leicester, in 1861, which was headed by Mrs James, a 50 year old widow who worked as a silk winder. Her daughter Elizabeth (25) was a dressmaker and unmarried, but they had with them two '*grandchildren*' aged 5 and six months, both of whom bore the surname James. Where the grandmother was young enough, the child was likely to be passed off as her own - but where elderly

⁶ Pigot's Leicester Directory (1822-3, 1828-9 and 1835 issues)

⁷ Buchanan's Trade Directory (1867); The Leicester Trade Directory (1870) It becomes increasingly difficult to follow dressmakers as the lists get longer, partly because of the number of duplicate surnames and apparent changes of address. Christian names are of little help because of the preponderance of Elizabeths, Elizas, Marys and Mary Annes.

'mothers' had one toddler and grown up daughters living at home, it is reasonable to be suspicious. Such was probably the case in the Jackson family at 31, Barston Street, Leicester in 1861. Rebecca Jackson (27) lived with her 49 year old mother who also had a one year old '*daughter*'.

Social classification

I have also attempted to analyse the social status of the families of women who went into dressmaking. There have been previous attempts to evaluate the social status of different sorts of occupations. W A Armstrong in an essay 'The Use of Information about Occupation' analysed some of these, and produced a structure of his own which categorised occupational status according to the social classifications used in 1921 and 1951, but with some modifications⁸. He established five main classes. Class A contained professional men (lawyers, doctors, dentists, clergy of all denominations), army and navy officers, ship owners and 'sharebrokers', employers, landowners and those of independent means. Class B consisted of teachers, policemen, land agents, tax collectors, station masters, railway inspectors and clerks. Class C was composed of tradesmen and craftsmen who were in business for themselves or who employed labour. Dressmakers were included in this group, as were drapers' assistants and '*assistants to the ordnance office*' - but no other assistants in any other trade. Class D included agricultural labourers, gardeners, servants, railway employees, carters, washerwomen and tradesmen in less prestigious fields like bricklayers and rope makers and dealers in various commodities. Class E contained charwomen, scavengers, general labourers, rag and paper collectors, errand boys and news vendors. It is a useful model, but I felt it was rather too detailed for my purposes.

Instead, I have defined three main groups to categorise the jobs of husbands, fathers and other male relatives who were 'heads' of households which contained dressmakers. Group 1 contains managers, employers of labour, master craftsmen (master builder, master mariner), people who described themselves as '*annuitant*' or '*independent*'⁹, clergymen¹⁰, teachers¹¹, craftsmen in luxury trades from the better

⁸ In Wrigley, E A (ed) 19th century Society, essays in the use of quantitative methods for the study of social data (1972)

⁹ In Leicester, a city I know well, I have placed those describing themselves as '*annuitant*' or '*independent*' in group 2 rather than in group 1 if they were living in rooms, or in what was then a poor area of town. The other towns analysed were smaller, and though they had their slum areas, these were much less distinguishable than those in larger cities.

¹⁰ Despite the number of clergymen's daughters who appear as dressmakers in fiction, in the census returns I have studied I have found only two dressmakers who were related to clergymen. They were both in Leicester - Ann Gates (30) of Morledge Street, daughter of a '*deputy minister*' (1841) and Mercy Fossett (17), at 11, Midland Street, the milliner grand-daughter of a Baptist minister (1861).

parts of town - like jewellers and watchmakers -, detective inspectors and odd individuals who appear to have belonged to 'white collar' jobs - like a *'Professor of French and music'*, or a *'School Board Attendance Officer'*. It corresponds to Armstrong's category B with a very few additions from his category A. For the most part, people in his category A did not have working wives and daughters. My group 2 contains craftsmen, tradesmen, clerks, 'agents' of various kinds, policemen, innkeepers, shopkeepers, commercial travellers, railway engine drivers¹² and such uncertain occupations as *'Traffic inspector'* and *'Collector of fees for a canal company'*. Again, it corresponds very closely with Armstrong's category C. Group 3 contains mostly unskilled trades - labourers of various kinds, miners, factory hands, warehousemen, carters, bill posters, hawkers, box makers, ironworkers, railway porters, domestic servants, nurses, laundresses, cellarmen, rope spinners, gardeners, tradesmens' journeymen, shop assistants and such odd jobs as *'guide over the sands'*, which was the occupation of the father of 19 year old Elizabeth Tweedale, milliner, of Sandside, Ulverston. It also includes members of those occupations that were not unskilled, but which are known to have been particularly depressed in the mid 19th century - framework knitters, shoemakers and tailors. It therefore tallies closely, but not exactly, with Armstrong's categories D and E.

Population and the numbers of dressmakers

First of all, it will be useful to compare the numbers of millinery and dressmaking firms listed in the census with the numbers actually engaged in the trades. This is best shown in tabular form.

Dressmakers and population

	Leicester	Melton Mowbray	Sidmouth	Ulverston
Population 1841	50,806	3937	3309	5352
Dressmakers 1841	292	-	66	58
Firms 1841*	191	5	4	17
Population 1861	68,052	4446	3354	7414
Dressmakers 1861	1028	82	97	122
Firms 1861*	115	18	7	29

¹¹ Despite the fact that school teachers and governesses were poorly paid and much despised, these were still 'respectable' occupations requiring a degree of education

¹² From oral history testimony within my own family. One of my great great uncles was an engine driver in the 1870s and according to my late grandmother it was a much sought-after job, almost like being an airline pilot!

Dressmakers and population (cont)

	Leicester	Melton Mowbray	Sidmouth	Ulverston
Population 1881	124,203	6347	3475	10,008
Dressmakers 1881	1081	81	143	170
Firms 1881* ¹³	191	10	9	16 ¹⁴

This would suggest that the main increase in the number of firms had taken place before 1861 and that by that date firms were employing larger numbers of staff than they had in 1841. Between 1861 and 1881 the expansion of the trade slowed down, despite the huge growth in population, possibly as a result of the economic decline of the mid 1870s.

Age groups

Despite the fact that fictional dressmakers were always young, and the implication that few dressmakers could possibly survive into old age because of the rigours of their trade, the figures suggest that the spread of dressmakers across the age spectrum was actually remarkably even. In Leicester in 1841 just two out of 291¹⁵ dressmakers recorded in the census were under the age of 15, though this may be due to the fact that the ages of girls aged 13 and 14 were (inaccurately) rounded up to 15. 49/291 were aged 15 to 20 - the age band during which most dressmakers received their training as either indentured or de facto apprentices. 133/291 - almost half - were in the age range 20 to 30, most of whom were unmarried or childless newly-weds. These women would have completed their basic training and would at the very least have been working as 'improvers' or 'second hands'. Some would, no doubt, have been assistants or even 'first hands'. 70/291 were women in their 30s. No doubt many of their cohort had left the trade, temporarily or permanently, to look after husbands and young children. 37/291 were over 40 and of those, 7 were 60 or over.

It is impossible to analyse the situation in Melton Mowbray in 1841 because virtually the whole of the 1841 census entries for the town are illegible. However, the picture was similar in Sidmouth with 4/133

¹³ * Taken from the trade directory for that date which is, in each case, the nearest surviving one to the census date. For Leicester this means 1847 (Slater's), 1861 (Drake's) and 1882 (Wright's); for Melton Mowbray, 1847 (Slater's), 1864 (Post Office) and 1881 (Kelly's); for Sidmouth, 1844 (Pigot's), 1857 (Billing's) and 1878-9 (White's); for Ulverston, 1848 (Slater's), 1866 (P Mannex and Co) and 1882 (P Mannex and Co).

¹⁴ This directory does not seem to have been very full - it does not, for example, include Elizabeth Pattinson.

¹⁵ NB where there is a discrepancy between the overall total and that shown in other analyses, it is because of illegibility or absence of some data in the original return

dressmakers being under 15, 23/133 being aged 15 to 20, 42 being aged 20 to 30, 25 being aged 30 to 40 and 39 being over 40, of whom 9 were 60 or over. Perhaps the higher percentage of older women in the trade suggests that a number had seen trade opportunities expand in the 1820s with the influx of wealthy new residents, and had brushed up their sewing skills to take advantage of them. Alternatively, it might simply reflect the fact that Sidmouth was a healthier place to live than Leicester, and more working women survived into their 40s, 50s and 60s.

Of the 54 Ulverston dressmakers whose ages are recorded, one was under 15, 10 were aged between 15 and 20, and 29 were aged between 20 and 30. Over the age of 30 the numbers declined sharply - perhaps reflecting the harshness of life in the area. 9/54 dressmakers were aged 30 to 40, but only 5 were over 40, and of those only 2 were over 60.

By 1861 there were considerably more women employed in the trade, and the age balance had changed. Of 1,028 Leicester dressmakers 14 were under 15; 148 were between 15 and 20; 442 were between 20 and 30 but 226 were aged 30 to 40; 172 were between 40 and 60 and 26 were over 60.

In Melton there were 82 dressmakers and of these none were under 15; 20 were aged between 15 and 20; 27 between 20 and 30; 21 between 30 and 40; 14 were over 40, only one of whom was over 60. Of Sidmouth's 97 dressmakers, 7 were under 15; 17 were between 15 and 20; 37 between 20 and 30; 20 between 30 and 40; and 16 between 40 and 60. None were over 60. In Ulverston, 4/122 dressmakers were under 15; 38 were between 15 and 20; 49 were between 20 and 30; thereafter the numbers decline sharply with just 19/122 aged between 30 and 40 and 12/122 being over 40. Again, none were over 60.

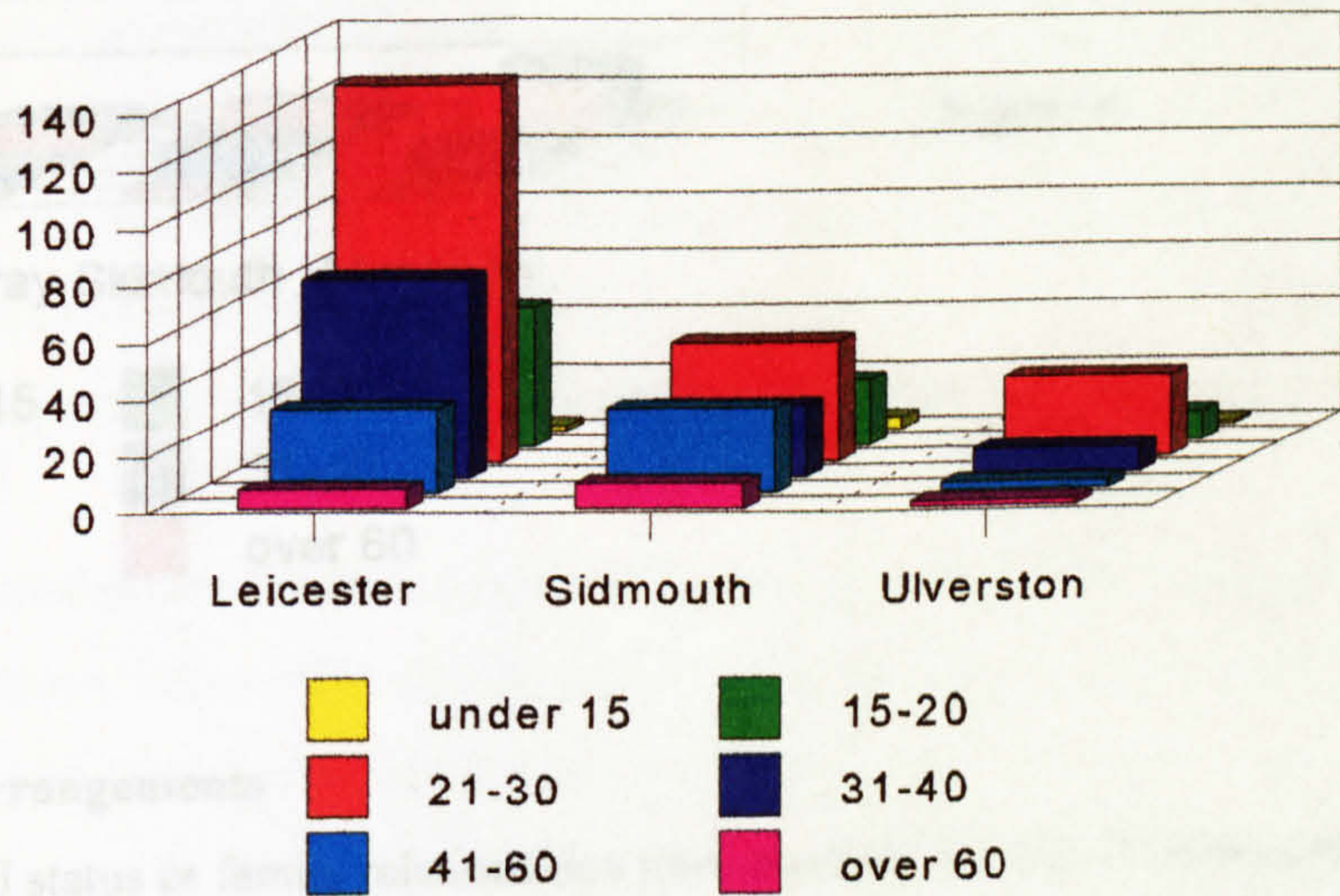
The balance remained much the same in the 1881, though a larger number of under 15s were employed. Leicester had 33/1,081, Melton had 1/81¹⁶, Sidmouth had 4/143 and Ulverston had 2/170. Of the same numbers, Leicester had 195 in the 15-20 'trainee' band; Melton had 21; Sidmouth had 23; and Ulverston had 58. Leicester had 304 dressmakers in the next age band (20-30), and 180 30 year-olds, while Melton had 27 and 10, Sidmouth had 42 and 25, and Ulverston had 53 and 20. Of Leicester's dressmakers, 242 were over 40, and 50 of them were over 60; in Melton the figures were 22 of whom 6 were 60+; in

¹⁶ Many of the returns for Melton are illegible, so none of the figures for 1881 are complete. This is true throughout for Leicester, but the distortion is greater when the sample is smaller

Sidmouth there were 39 of whom 9 were over 60; in Ulverston 7 of the 34 over 40s were over 60. Life expectancy within the trade, as well as outside it, had improved considerably.

Figure 4

Ages of dressmakers, 1841



Ages of dressmakers, 1861

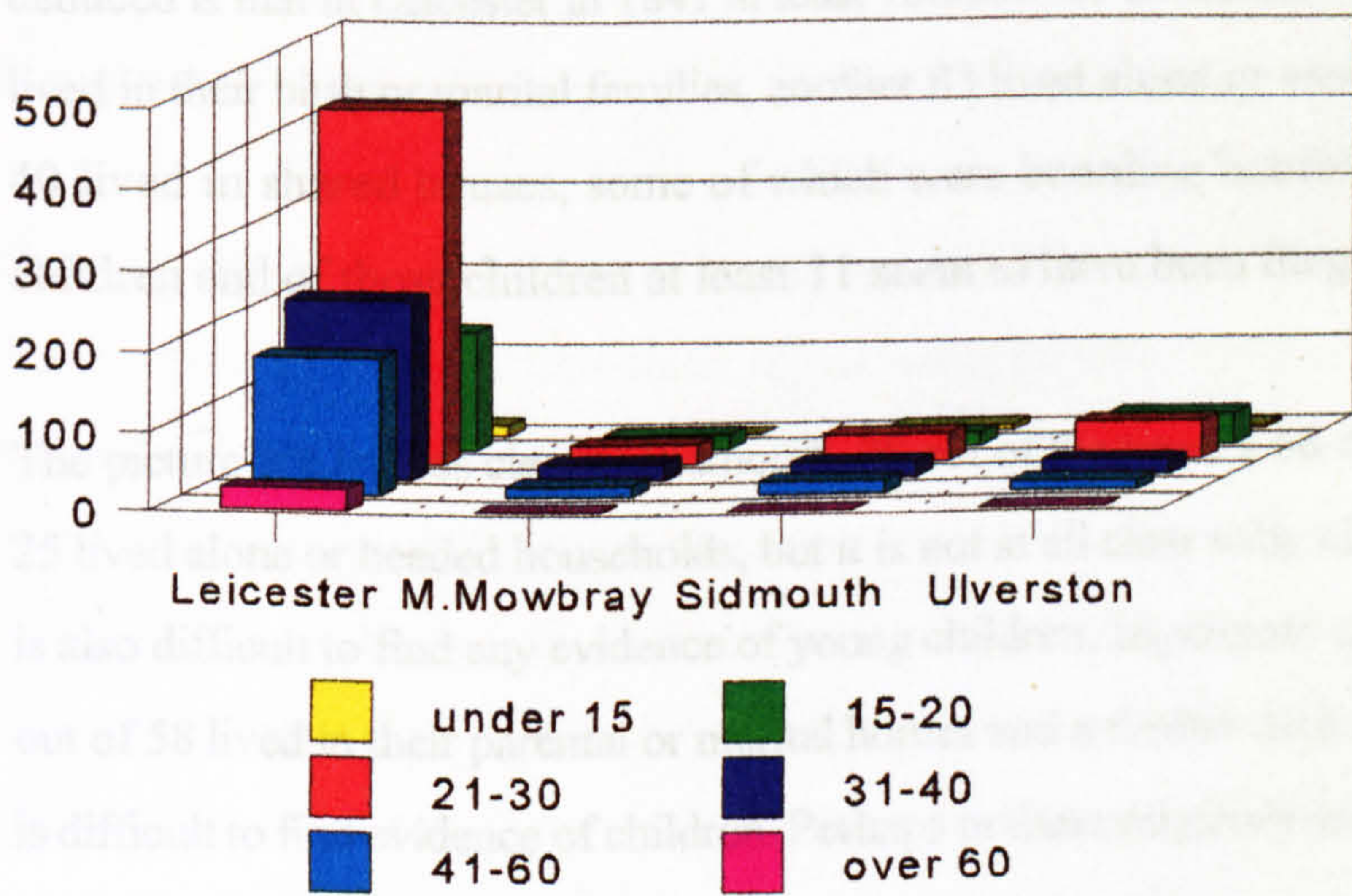


Figure 5

Ages of dressmakers, 1881

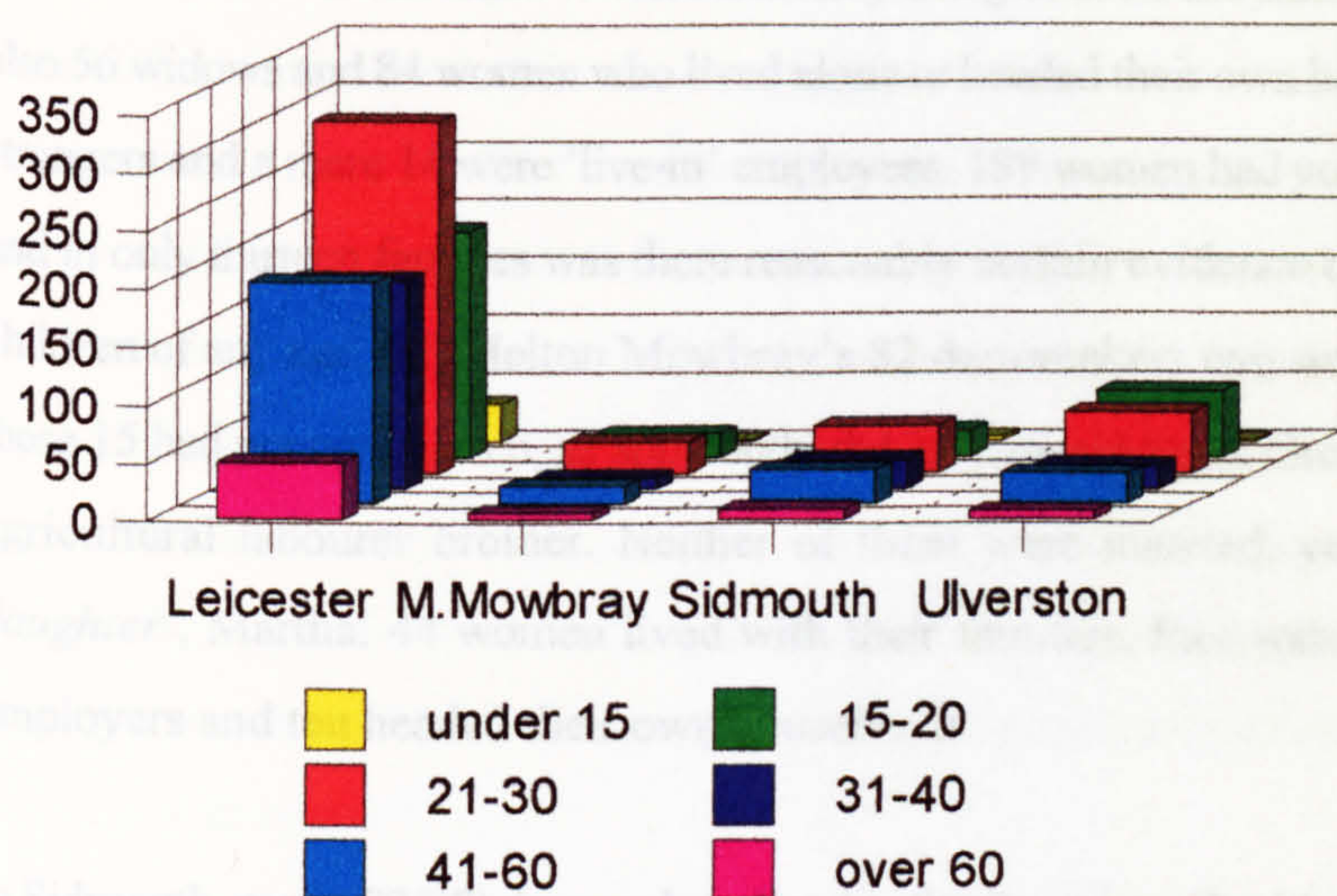


Figure 6

Marital status and living arrangements

It is not easy to assess marital status or family relationships from the 1841 census. Widows cannot be identified, husbands can seldom be distinguished from brothers and it is often impossible to work out who a child's parents were. Lodgers cannot be distinguished from, for example, married daughters or nieces whose surnames were different from that of the household's head. The only statistic that can reliably be deduced is that in Leicester in 1841 at least 126/249 -so about half - of the town's recorded dressmakers lived in their birth or marital families, another 83 lived alone or were heads of households, and a further 40 lived in shared houses, some of which were boarding houses¹⁷. At least 69 of the 249 had young children and of those children at least 11 seem to have been illegitimate.

The picture is a lot less clear in Sidmouth. 28 out of the town's 66 dressmakers definitely lived at home, 25 lived alone or headed households, but it is not at all clear with whom the remainder lived or lodged. It is also difficult to find any evidence of young children, legitimate or otherwise. In Ulverston, at least 30 out of 58 lived in their parental or marital homes and a further 20 headed their own households. Again, it is difficult to find evidence of children. Perhaps in these relatively isolated places there was more prejudice against working mothers.

¹⁷ For the purposes of this analysis I have treated boarders and lodgers under the same heading. However there was a distinction. Boarders lived as family, sharing meals and living space. Lodgers were more independent and had their own household - even if it was only a single room and shared kitchen - within the landlord's establishment. (See Emerson, Jane 'The Lodging Market in Victorian Exeter' *Southern History* 9 (1987))

By 1861 the picture is much clearer. In Leicester, out of 1,028 dressmakers, 433 lived with their parents or other close relatives and 317 were married, though not all the husbands were in evidence. There were also 56 widows and 84 women who lived alone or headed their own households. 80 lodged or boarded with strangers and a mere 14 were 'live-in' employees. 199 women had young children (school age or younger) and in only thirteen families was there reasonably certain evidence of dressmakers who had illegitimate children of any age. Of Melton Mowbray's 82 dressmakers two were widows, 22 were married and of these 15 had young children, as apparently did 25 year-old Sarah Greasley, who lived with her 28 year old agricultural labourer brother. Neither of them were married, yet they had a one year old '*grand daughter*', Martha! 44 women lived with their families, four were in lodgings, three lived with their employers and ten headed their own households.

In Sidmouth, most (70/97) dressmakers lived in family units - 47 with parents or other relatives and 23 with husbands. Four women were widows. Fifteen of these married women, and one unmarried one, had young children. No dressmakers lived with their employers - in such a small place home was likely to be within walking distance so there was no need for employers to accommodate their staff - but five dressmakers boarded with families. It was not quite the same in Ulverston. 84/122 dressmakers lived at home, but of these, only ten lived in marital homes. There were also five widows. Eleven families had young children and two of these children were illegitimate. Fourteen women lived alone or headed their own households, seven boarded and twenty lived-in with their employers. Ulverston seems to have drawn its dressmakers from a wider geographical area than did Sidmouth.

The main change in 1881 was in the numbers of live-in employees. Out of 1,081 Leicester dressmakers (the numbers had changed little since 1861), 364 lived with their parents or other close relatives, 240 were married and lived with their husbands, 106 lived-in with their employers or lodged in boarding houses or private families, and 109 headed their own households. The increase in live-in employees was almost certainly due to the growth of department store workrooms. There were 59 widows and at least 28 married women whose husbands were not in evidence. Ten families definitely contained illegitimate children and 118 dressmaker mothers had one or more young children to care for. In Melton Mowbray over half -42/81- dressmakers lived with parents or other family and fifteen were married, while a further 8 were widows. Seven families contained young children, and all these seem to have been legitimate. Nine women were boarders, two lived with their employers and eleven headed their own households. In Sidmouth, out of 143 dressmakers, 59 lived with their parents and 22 with their husbands. 17 were in lodgings, and 16 were heads of their own households or lived alone. There were 5 widows, 4 husband-less

wives and 13 families with young children. In more traditional Ulverston, out of 170 dressmakers, 94 lived with their parents and only 8 with their husbands. Two women had no husband in evidence - and thirteen dressmakers had young children - making bastards of at least three of them. Ten dressmakers were widows and 17 were heads of households, while a surprising 29 were boarders. In a rural district, local girls wishing to train in town had no option but to go into lodgings. One factor which may well have contributed to the Victorian attitude to dressmakers was the fact that a small but significant number of them did live in lodgings. The Victorians demonized boarding houses as representing the way in which family life had broken down in industrialized society, and they were generally seen as being little better than brothels. The Common Lodging Houses Act of 1850 actually gave agents of the Metropolitan police the right to inspect London lodging houses, at any time and without notice, to check up on who was sleeping with whom¹⁸.

**There is insufficient evidence at this stage to distinguish between women living in lodgings and those in private accommodation.*

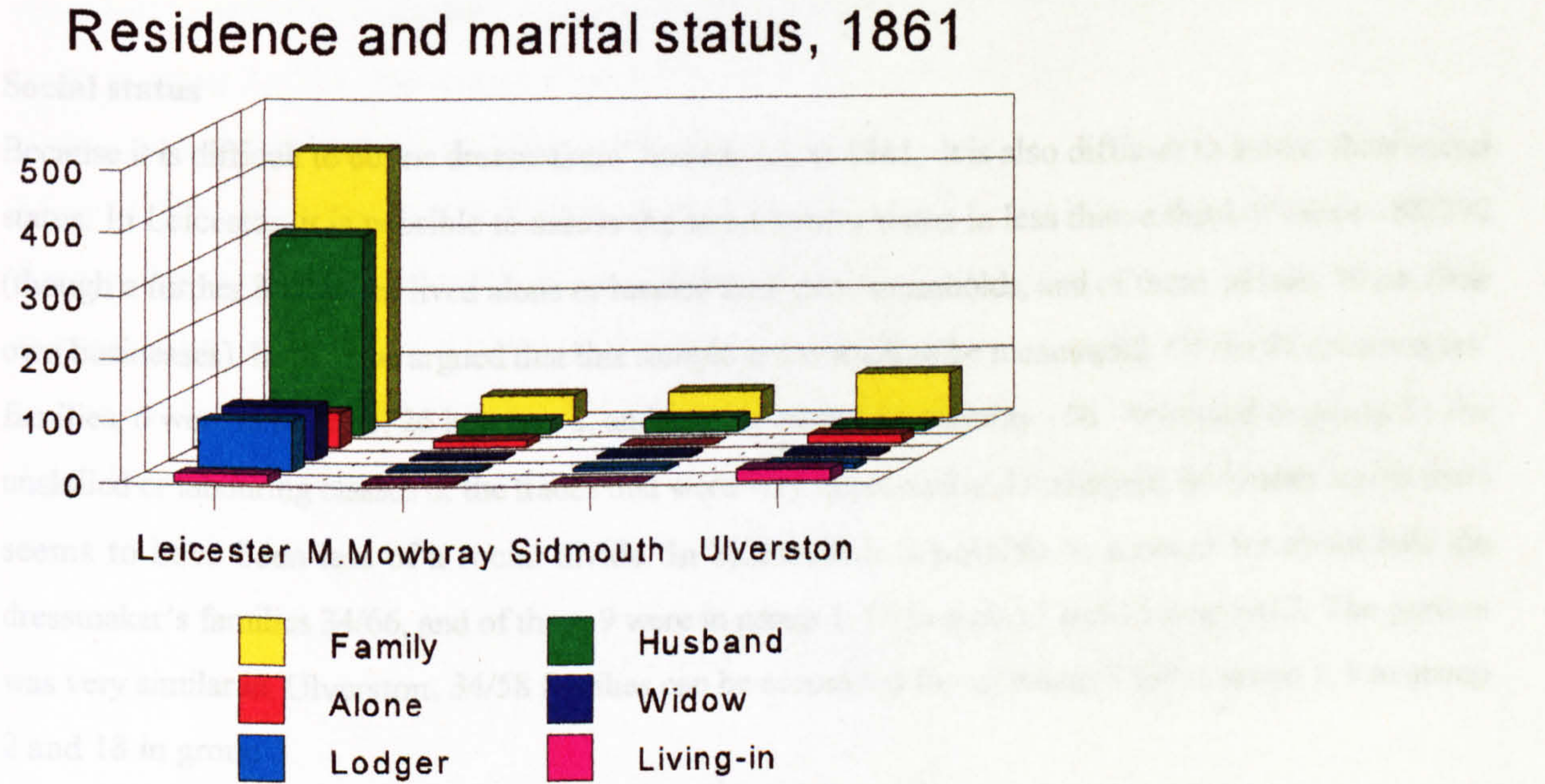


Figure 7

NB There is insufficient evidence to compile a viable table for residence and marital status in 1841.

¹⁸ Ibid

Residence and marital status, 1881

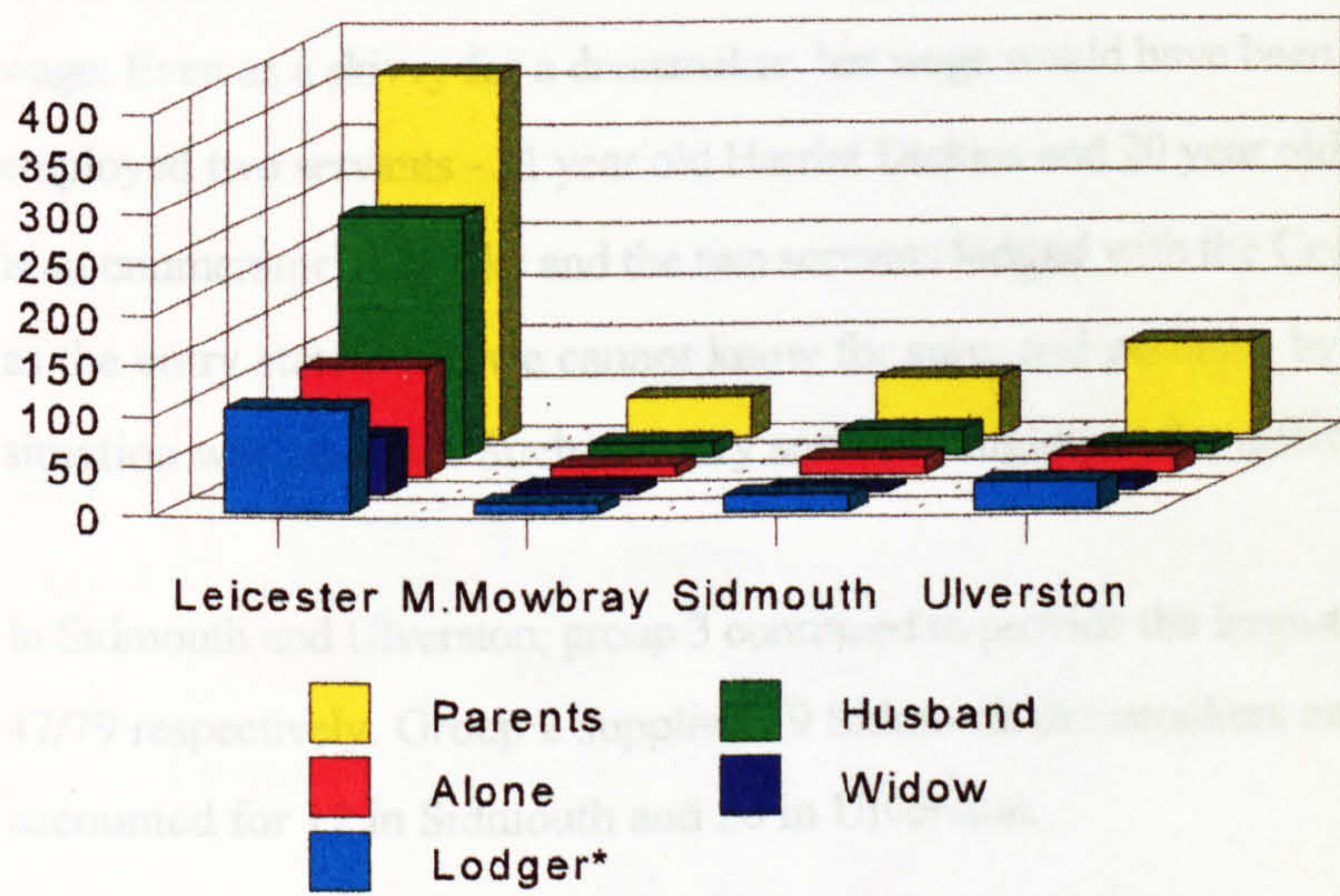


Figure 8

*There is insufficient evidence at this date to distinguish between women lodging in their employers' boarding houses and those in private accommodation.

Social status

Because it is difficult to define dressmakers' households in 1841, it is also difficult to assess their social status. In Leicester, it is possible to assess the household's status in less than a third of cases - 88/292 (though a further 83 women lived alone or headed their own households, and of these, at least 10 ran their own businesses). It could be argued that this sample is too small to be meaningful. Of the 88 dressmakers' families, 6 were in group 1, 26 in group 2, and an overwhelming majority - 56 - belonged to group 3 - the unskilled or labouring classes or the trades that were very depressed and underpaid. In smaller towns there seems to have been less of a social divide. In Sidmouth it is possible to account for about half the dressmaker's families 34/66, and of these 9 were in group 1, 10 in group 2 and 15 in group 3. The pattern was very similar in Ulverston. 34/58 families can be accounted for, of whom 7 fell in group 1, 9 in group 2 and 18 in group 3.

By 1861 the picture is much clearer. Almost three quarters of Leicester's dressmakers lived in households with working male relatives. Of these the majority - 401 - belonged to group 3, but 249 belonged to group 2 and a significant 72 to group 1. In nearby Melton 60/82 women lived with husbands or male relatives and again the majority - 34/60 - belonged to group 3, while 19 belonged to group 2 and a mere 7 to group 1. There are some anomalies, and one of the oddest is the household headed by Mrs Coltman, a widowed charwoman who lived in the High Street - a fairly prestigious address, though it is not clear whether she had a house or rooms.. Her 15 year old daughter, Eliza, was a dressmaker - presumably an apprentice or

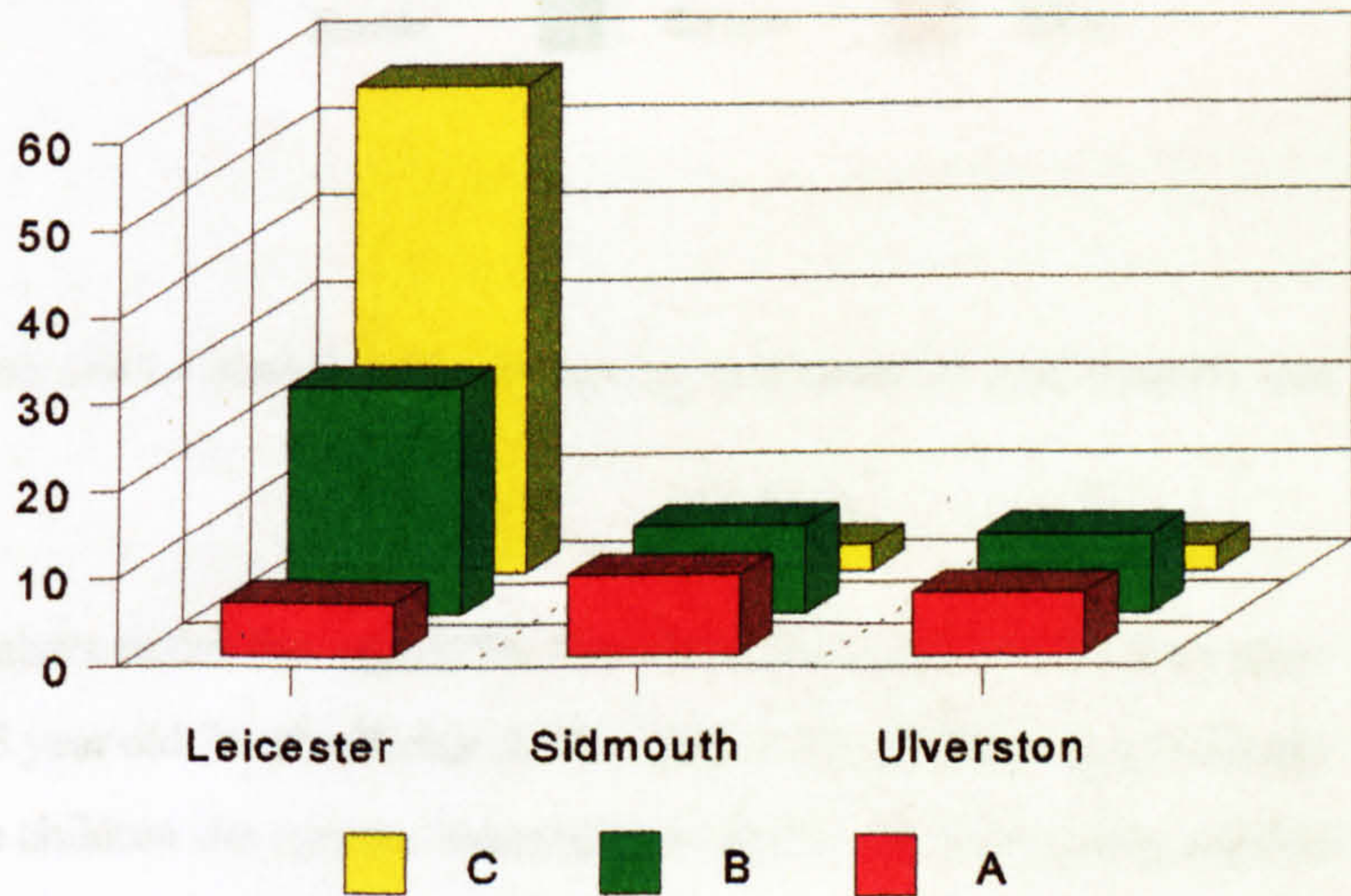
low paid assistant, given her age. Charwomen fall into category 3 (or Armstrong's class E), lower down the social scale even than female servants, and Eliza, as an apprentice, would not have brought home a wage. Even as a skivvy for a dressmaker her wage would have been minimal. Nonetheless, the household employed **two** servants - 31 year old Harriet Dickins and 20 year old Emma Tyers. In all probability this is an enumerator's mistake and the two servants **lodged** with the Coltmans rather than working for them as the entry states. But we cannot know for sure, and perhaps, by some quirk of circumstance, such a situation was possible. Such an entry serves to highlight the difficulties of using census evidence.

In Sidmouth and Ulverston, group 3 continued to provide the largest numbers of dressmakers - 30/61 and 47/79 respectively. Group 2 supplied 19 Sidmouth dressmakers and 12 Ulverston ones, while Group 1 accounted for 12 in Sidmouth and 20 in Ulverston.

By 1881 more women were living away from home and it is only possible to define the social status of about half Leicester's dressmakers. Group 3 still predominated with 300 members; there were almost as many in group 2 - 231, and a mere 37 in group 1- a considerable decline since 1861. In Melton 53/81 women were in families with male heads, of whom 28 were in group 3, 17 in group 2 and 8 in group 1. Many of these men were grooms. Following Armstrong, I have normally put grooms in group 3, though it is possible that in a town like Melton where skill with horses was at a premium, it might be more realistic to treat grooms as craftsmen, which would reverse the balance between groups 2 and 3. In Sidmouth, we can now account for roughly two thirds of the families - 99/143 - of whom 52 were in group 3, 33 in group 2 and 14 in group 1. The figure is even higher for Ulverston - 122/170 - with 63 in group 3, 40 in group and 19 in group 1.

Social status of dressmakers, 1841

Figure 9



Social status of dressmakers, 1861

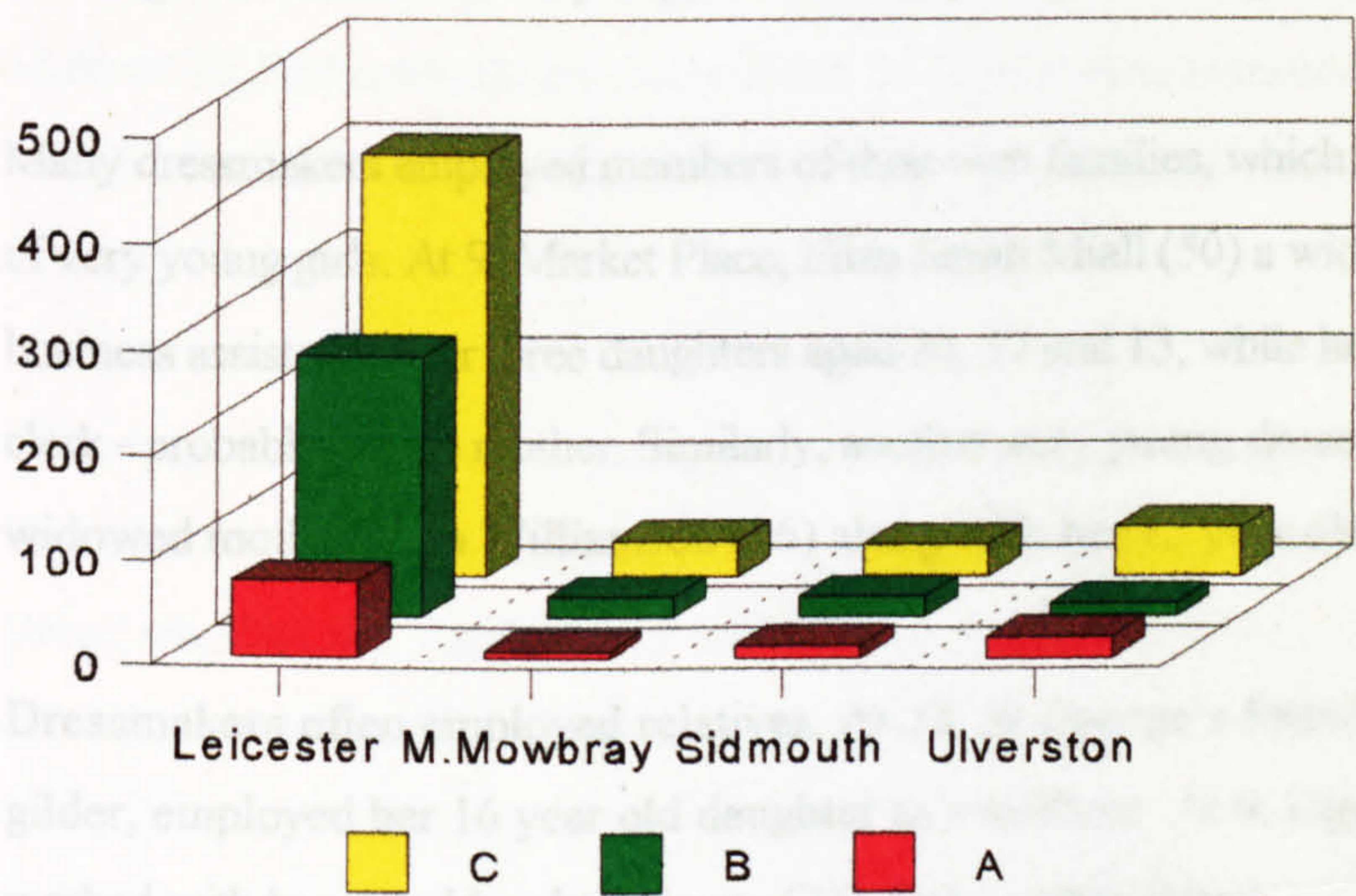


Figure 10

Social status of dressmakers 1881

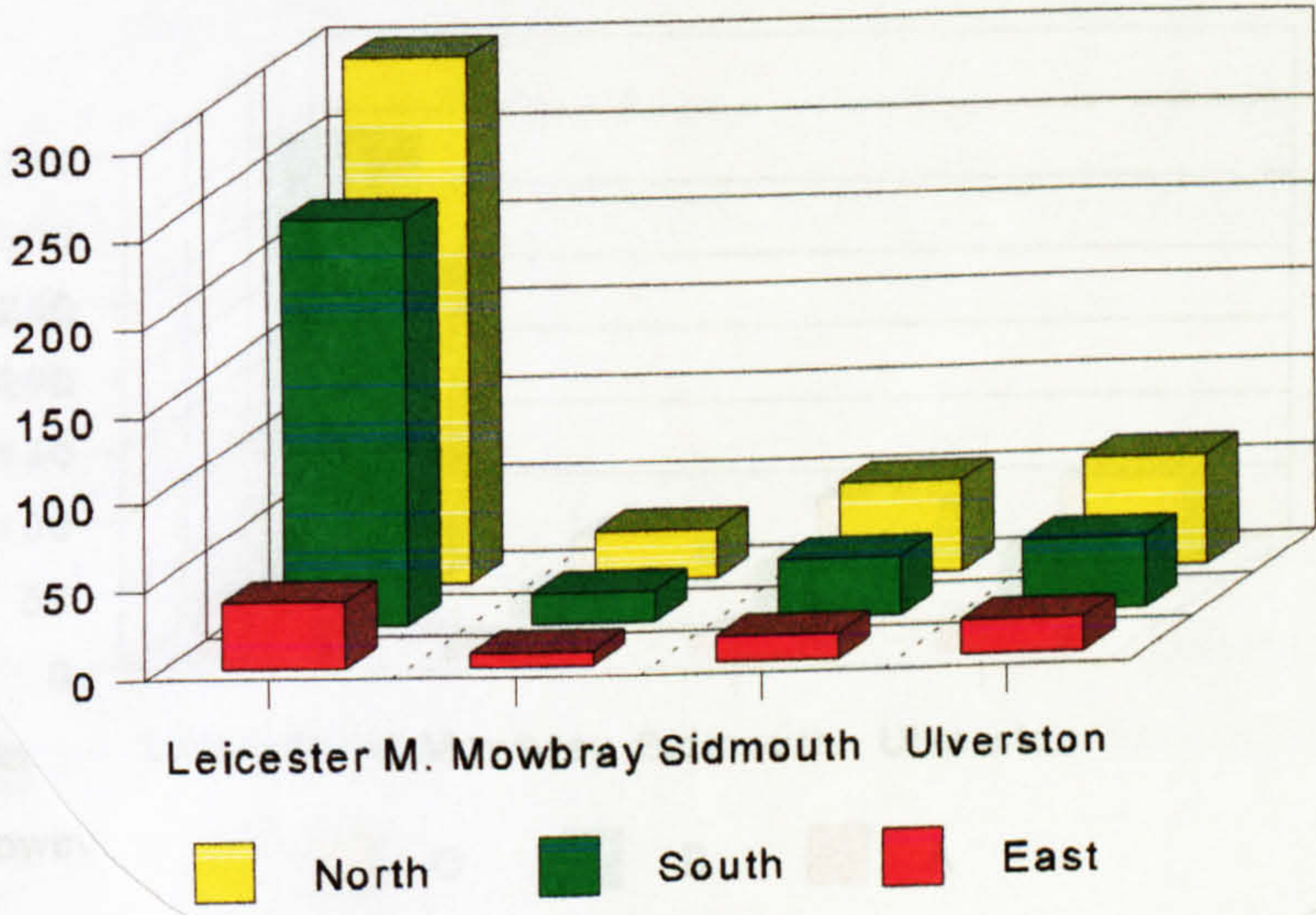


Figure 11

Leicester in 1861

The census returns - particularly post 1841 - also provide intriguing snapshots of real families and individuals.

Few girls were employed as dressmakers under the age of 15, but when they were, the returns often indicate the reason, as in the case of 13 year old Amelia Richards. Her father was a tailor - a notoriously under paid profession - and out of nine children she was the eldest girl - so her family desperately needed

her to bring in a wage. Similarly, Lizzie Hills (13) was the eldest child of a widowed schoolmistress, and her wage was needed to help support her two younger siblings

Many dressmakers employed members of their own families, which sometimes explains the employment of very young girls. At 9, Market Place, Eliza Smith Miall (50) a widow, ran a millinery and dressmaking business assisted by her three daughters aged 24, 17 and 13, while her 15 year old son worked as an office clerk - probably for his mother. Similarly, another very young dressmaker, also aged 13, worked for her widowed mother, Ann Williamson (36) along with her 15 year old sister, at 2, Newarke Street.

Dressmakers often employed relatives. At 33, St George's Street Martha West, wife of a carver and gilder, employed her 16 year old daughter as a milliner. At 9, Upper Hill Street, Matilda Twilley (57) worked with her granddaughter Emma (21). Sisters often found work for each other, like Mary and Anne Jenkins (20 and 16) daughters of a gardener, who lived in '*Crab Street Yard 1*'. At 64, Humberstone Road, the Dakin children lived with their grandparents. Elizabeth (23) was a dressmaker, her two younger sisters (21 and 20) were milliners, the 19 year old worked in a shop, the 17 year old ran the house while their 14 year old brother was still at school. 38 year old Ann Throsby at 12, Graham Street was a dressmaker, as were her two younger sisters, while all four of the daughters of the publican who kept the Birmingham Tavern on Hinckley Road were dressmakers.

Others struggled to manage alone. Their addresses are often a key to the type of business they ran or worked for. For example, it is unlikely that the widowed dressmaker who lived alone in Pettifors Yard (off Halford Street) was working for a particularly up-market clientele. Sarah Blackwell (23 and single) at 13 James Street and Ann Warner (25) renting a room in 16, Saxton Street are other examples of dressmakers living entirely alone. They were, however, in the minority.

Many women combined dressmaking with looking after a large family. 23 year old Susannah Middleton seems to have been particularly unfortunate in this respect. Her husband was a builder almost twice her age, and as well as working herself, she was step mother to his six children, only two of whom were old enough to work. Other women had to work even when their children were very tiny. 24 year old Ann Mason lived at 43, Humberstone Gate. Her husband made gloves - a poorly paid occupation - so Ann continued to work as a dressmaker despite having two babies. Mary Morris on Hill Street was a dressmaker with three little children; her husband was a tanner, also ill paid. Mary Ann Walton at 6, Brunswick Street was a milliner, wife of a framesmith, and had to work despite her four young children

as did Sarah Pate (33) at 5, Metcalfe Street and Hannah Price, wife of a tailor at 48, Friday Street. Elizabeth Almond at 28, Northumberland Street was the wife of a sawyer and also had 4 small children, while at 76, Northgate Street Clara Greet, wife of a shoe trimmer, at the age of 20 had already had 2 babies. Mary Holland (37), wife of a turner, had seven children under the age of twelve and still managed to work.

Other women were widowed young and left with families to support - like Mary Ann Hordern (29) at 2, Metcalfe Street, whose children were aged 7, 5, 4 and 1, or Hannah Wormleighton (34) at 61, Bedford Street, who had four children and was apparently so hard up that her 12 year old daughter had to work as a ticket maker and her 11 year old son as an errand boy.

Some young women had to work to support their illegitimate offspring. Sarah Gill lived at 42, Wheat Street with her two illegitimate sons - Alfred aged 6 and Frederick aged 4. She does not seem to have had a resident partner. Neither did Jane Raby (32) and unmarried, at 23, Grafton Place, who had a 9 year old son and a baby daughter, nor Ellen Mason who lived alone, on Grace Road, with baby Ada.

Unmarried dressmakers often lodged in families which contained girls who were probably their colleagues. At 55, St George's Street lived widowed Jane Dawson, a '*landed proprietor*'. Despite the grand title, her land did not bring in sufficient money for her to live on - her 17 year old daughter worked as a milliner, and two dressmakers boarded with them.

Others lodged in much more dubious circumstances, like Agnes Galpin, a mantle maker from Chard in Somerset who lived in a common lodging house on Humberstone Gate or Bridget Conway, from Ireland in a lodging house at 6, South Row. Another lodging house, in Britannia Street, was kept by an umbrella maker who let rooms to 15 people, including, in 1861, two dressmakers. Women from out of town often boarded with people they had known, or known of, in their places of birth; for example Marianne Richards (17) from Bedfordshire boarded with a retired farmer who had also been born there. Poorer families often let rooms. A framework knitter and his wife and six children lived in rooms in Providence Place, letting a corner to Elizabeth Clayton (25), a dressmaker. Catherine Roberts boarded at 4, Lower Green Lane with another poor family. The husband was an agricultural labourer, the wife picked rags, there were five young children, and the man's widowed charwoman cousin also lived there with her 7 year old son. Whole families sometimes lived in lodgings. At 10 Duke Street a carpenter/joiner, his milliner/dressmaker wife and their three young children lived with another family.

Not far away, in Regent Street, there were numerous dressmakers. It was a mixed area with some large houses - Henrietta Ann Hazelrigg '*baronet's widow*' lived at number 70, while John Weatherhead, widower and curator of New Walk museum, lived at number 71 with his three school age children and his housekeeper. But at number 4, Mary Ann Cocker (17), a milliner, lived with her widowed mother and 73 year old grandfather, a retired sawyer, while at number 8 were the Phipps family - a widow, her two seamstress daughters, hosier's assistant son, and younger school age children.

Some very respectable families took in lodgers. Eliza Draycott from Syston boarded at 40, Chatham Street with the family of a druggist's clerk. He had a wife and five daughters, the two eldest of whom were pupil teachers. There were numerous dressmakers in Chatham Street but it is hard to see which - if any - was the employer. Two dressmakers boarded at number 7; Sarah Parkinson (21) lived with her uncle at the Joiner's Arms; Elizabeth Ann Grant, wife of a boot and shoemaker and mother of a baby son, lived at number 8. Clara Kirby at number 16 was a milliner, living at home with her cow keeper parents. They were a comparatively well-to-do family; Mr Kirby employed two men, and his wife and eldest daughter assisted him as '*milk letters*'. Their eldest son was a certificated teacher and two younger boys were still at school. Finally, at number 42, lived Harriet Cousins, wife of a hosier's assistant, with her baby and a lodger. A tailor and his tailoress wife lived at number 6, and another tailoress lived at number 38 with her husband and five children. There was a straw bonnet maker (a different trade to millinery) at 58 and seamstresses at numbers 64 and 66.

Like the Kirbys, quite respectable families might expect their daughters to learn a trade -as did 17 year old Sarah Young from Bedford Street, daughter of a '*manufacturer of hosiery employing 20 men*', or Mary Ann Bass (18) daughter of a frameholder who employed 30 men. Mary and Martha Cockerill at 6½ Osborne Street, aged 19 and 16, were both dressmakers and the daughters of a grazier who had 23 acres. Emmeline and Clara Weston (20 and 18) on Marlborough Street were both milliners, and the daughters of a '*Professor of Music*'. Emma Bland on Redcross Street was the daughter of a builder who employed 74 men and 8 boys, and whose family employed a housemaid, a nursemaid and an elderly nurse.

Typical of the older married dressmaker was 53 year old Mary Harrison, wife of a railway guard, with two sons still living at home - one a lithographic printer, the other still at school. She lived at 62, Northampton Street, but further down the road was a much less respectable household consisting of another dressmaker, Caroline Parkin (43), her messenger husband and their five children. Their daughter, like her mother, was a dressmaker, but there were also two unemployed teenage sons and two younger

children. At the other end of the working class social spectrum, at number 14, was Sarah Goodman, wife of a skilled craftsman, a watch maker and jeweller. The couple were young and had no children, but they let rooms to another dressmaker, probably Sarah's colleague, who came from Liverpool. They probably both worked for their neighbours, Mary and Sarah Leach at number 22.

The Leach sisters were in their early twenties. Dressmakers were apprenticed in their early teens and were experienced hands at what, to modern eyes, seems a remarkably early age. At 56, Richard Street Elizabeth Wall and Sarah Ann Smith were 'partners' in their own dressmaking firm at the tender ages of 17 and 19. For dressmakers who did not marry and did not have sisters in the trade, such a partnership solved the problem of being alone. For example, Sarah Brown (39) and Sarah Frith, ten years her junior, both milliners, lived together on Humberstone Road.

Even fairly small firms might have live-in staff. At 38, Gallowtree Gate Priscilla Bark (41), wife of a hatter and with two children at home, employed a shop assistant, two millinery assistants, a cook and a housemaid, all of whom lived in. Similarly, Peter Wardle on New Walk was a draper, living with his young wife and two children - Anthony aged 6 and Rebecca, 2. Their household included two milliners in his employ - Nancy Mills (25) from Norfolk and Emma Dale (20) from Huntingdon, as well as two saleswomen, a cook and a housemaid. At 63, Welford Road Sarah Shirley (30) wife of a grocer's assistant and the mother of a two year old son, ran her own millinery business and employed 15 year old, Sheffield-born Mary Ann Alice Bromhead as an apprentice.

Employing a servant was a good indicator of working class prosperity, especially when the household was small. Ann Morris (27), the childless dressmaker wife of a gas-fitter-cum-bell-hanger, employed a 16 year old skivvy at 40, Upper Charles Street. At 2 ½ Humberstonegate, Ruth Ward (36) the dressmaker wife of a draper, and with no children at home, also employed a maid-of-all-work.

Some families were clearly impoverished. At 19 Grafton Place lived three generations of unsupported women - Mary Campbell, a 44 year old widowed dressmaker, her 78 year old widowed mother and her pupil teacher daughter (18). Phoebe Selvidge lived at 7, Burleys Lane with her father, a wool comber, still working at 73, and her mother (68) who ran a little grocer's shop. Two of her younger brothers worked, but at poorly paid, unsocial jobs - one was a bone sawyer and one a factory porter. Maryann Robinson (31) on Abbeygate also had a husband whose work paid badly and was regarded as anti-social - he was a dyer's journeyman. She helped support her family of four children (aged between 1 and 8) by millinery

and dressmaking. Dressmakers in poor families had to work for as long as they could. Ann Granger, wife of a coal higgler on Abbey Street, was still dressmaking at the age of 72. Sarah Carter, a 63 year old widow supported herself at 1, Higginson Street, by dressmaking and taking a lodger, as did Clara Holyoak on Caseway Lane who was the same age. Catherine Pettifor was still working at the age of 74, in Castle Yard, living with her unmarried '*bible woman*' daughter.

The census of 1881

The 1881 census provides similar insights. Some of the women living alone seem to have succeeded against all the odds. Elizabeth Hammersley lived in one of the terraced houses in Marble Street, number 22. She probably ran her own small business - Charlotte Kind, a 'machinist' lived with her, as did Elizabeth's 23 year old daughter, with her soldier husband and small baby. Elizabeth was 40 and told the enumerator she was unmarried - so her daughter was illegitimate, born when Elizabeth was just 17, yet she had successfully raised the girl to adulthood and retained a relationship with her. Elizabeth was not unique. Down in Sidmouth on Fore Street, 51 year old Rhoda Gridge worked as a dressmaker while her 13 year old illegitimate son worked as errand boy for the local miller.

Some young women found themselves responsible for their families at a remarkably early age. At 2, Porter Street, Leicester, 22 year old Augusta Hopkinson supported her widowed mother and younger brother by dressmaking and taking in three boarders. Margaret Postlethwaite of Ainslie Street in Ulverston found herself, at the age of 21, with her 16 year old sister Bridget, a pupil teacher, supporting both her mother and her unemployed father (a former clerk), by dressmaking and by looking after a 75 year old lodger.

Some children supported themselves in the absence of both their parents. At 1, East End Terrace, Leicester, lived Mary Ann Allen, aged 25 and her 22 year old sister, Isabella, who both worked as dressmakers. Their brother was a hosier, and another sister, 31 year old Lydia, acted as housekeeper to her siblings. At Gardiner's Place in Sidmouth a much younger group of siblings fended for themselves. 15 year old Clara Granger, a dressmaker, with her teenage brothers, one a porter and one a clerk, supported several younger siblings including a small baby.

At the other end of the age spectrum, 71 year old Sarah Spencer, in Old Fore Street, Sidmouth, lived alone and supported herself by dressmaking; and elderly sisters, Eliza (63) and Caroline Cox (56) ran a

dressmaking business on the Upper High Street with their niece, Ann. Over in Western Town, 68 year old Mary Ware, sister of a laundress, eked out a living making dresses for her neighbours.

The respectability of some families is still evident. At 76 Bartholomew Street, in Leicester's Highfields, Mary Caunt, a widow, lived carefully on her annuity. Two of her daughters, 25 year old Amelia and 19 year old Mary were milliners, her son was a house painter and another daughter taught music. Even middle class families required their daughters to work when they had a lot of mouths to feed. Young Emily Hough was the eldest child of an engineer's clerk - a decent white collar job - and her seventeen year old brother was an engineer's apprentice, learning a good trade, but probably still unwaged. However, the family had eight younger children - seven at school and a two year old toddler. They could not afford for Emily to be a lady - she had to earn, and so she worked as a dressmaker. At 13, London Road lived Mr Beale, 'artist' with his daughters, Annie, 22, a dressmaker, Sarah, 21, a dressmaker's assistant, and Lizzie, 19, a milliner. Millinery was widely regarded as an 'artistic' trade - no doubt her father thought it an appropriate one. Up in Ulverston, 20 year old Margaret Kemp, daughter of 'a supervisor for the Inland Revenue' became a dressmaker, while her two sisters became, respectively, a music teacher and a governess.

Many married women operated small businesses. Caroline Prince, aged 31, was the wife of a carpenter and lived at 9, Gladstone Street, Leicester. She had a six year old son and two baby daughters, but none the less managed to run her own dressmaking enterprise. She employed 20 year old Eliza Hankinson as her apprentice, and Eliza's 13 year old sister, Mary Ann, as a general servant. At numbers 17-19 Clarence Street, 56 year old Eliza Priestly, the wife of an (absent) linen draper worked as a dress and mantle maker with her widowed sister-in-law, Harriet Overton, aged 62. Eliza's 18 year old daughter Clara, worked in their shop, and the three were prosperous enough to employ a servant girl, Jane Rowley, aged 19 - not an untrained skivvy like little Mary Ann Hankinson¹⁹. Being able to afford a servant was, as we have seen, a good indicator of a working class family's success. Eliza Iliffe, at 6, New Bridge Street, was the wife of a joiner, she had a baby, worked as a dressmaker, and employed one servant girl.

Not all dressmakers lived in such respectable households. Daughters often went home when their marriages failed, though their families were probably less than eager to have them. In 1881, in Leicester,

¹⁹ Clarence Street runs north from Humberstonegate. It was not a prestigious town centre address, and theirs' was not a major firm.

26 year old Jennie Hayman was back home at Wheat Street, minus her husband, but with three tiny children in tow. She worked as a dressmaker, her mother was a framework knitter and her father was a plumber's labourer - all jobs at the bottom end of the earning spectrum. There would have been little comfort for Jennie's babies. Some daughters managed without a husband at all. At 1, Framland Street, lived 18 year old Hannah Allen, unmarried, with a one year old son, and working with her dressmaker mother. Her father was a bricklayer's labourer and she had numerous siblings. Working class families did not necessarily abandon their disgraced daughters. Other families were simply poor. Alice Felstead on Charnwood Street, for example, worked as a dressmaker and was the sole support of a widowed sister with two small children and of their elderly mother.

Elizabeth Hodgkinson was probably typical of many, reasonably prosperous, older working dressmakers. She was 49, the wife of a sailor, and she had six children at home, two of whom were still at school. The older ones were set to do well - one son was a coachman, one was an assistant librarian, one was a chemist's porter and the youngest worked as office boy in an architect's office.

The statistics show that most dressmakers lived in their own, their parents' or their husbands' homes, but not all were so fortunate. Some high street shops had a number of live-in staff. James Southam at 33, High Street, styled himself as *'milliner and commercial traveller'* but his wife probably supervised the workroom. 19 year old Penelope Hall from Wakefield lived with them as milliner's assistant, as did an apprentice, 18 year old Ann Shillaker. James Pitt, milliner and draper at number 164 employed his 22 year old sister, Edith, to run his millinery department and had six live-in female assistants.

John Billson at 51-55 Market Place, had an enormous number of staff living in boarding houses - two assistants and an apprentice, a dressmaker, six milliners, a saleswoman dressmaker, two saleswomen and two apprentice saleswomen, a mantle maker and two cooks and three housemaids to look after the boarding house and cater for the non-resident staff during the day. At number 59 there was another boarding house, in which lived Hannah Ostler, mantle saleswoman, aged 55, another mantle saleswoman, a mantle cutter, a costume saleswoman, two 'practical milliners', three saleswoman milliners, a dressmaker, a dressmaker's apprentice, a warehouseman, a cook, a housemaid and a housekeeper.

Workwomen employed by smaller businesses had to find their own lodgings. Many poor families took in lodgers in a desperate attempt to make ends meet. Elizabeth Ward and Mary Elizabeth Gilliver were young spinster dressmakers who had both come to Leicester from Northampton and found lodgings with a

childless widow, Mary Whitmarsh, who worked as a shoe fitter. Sarah Ann Griffiths, a 32 year old widow with five young children, at 25, Oak Street, supported her family by dressmaking, and found a corner of her cramped home to let to a female lodger. The menage at 80 Gladstone Street was headed by Susan Houghton, a widowed sewing machinist. She had two young children, only one of whom was old enough to go to school, her parents lived with her - her mother presumably ran the household - and her father worked as a clicker in the shoe trade. Somehow they also found space for six lodgers, including 26 year old Ann Timson, who worked as a dressmaker. Dressmakers could not afford to be too choosy about their lodgings. Agnes Martha Cooper found herself living at 8, Victoria Street, without her husband, lodging with a stonemason, his wife and their seven children - three working teenagers, two schoolchildren and two toddlers.

Others lodged with family, like 45 year old Ellen Whiting who lived at 159, Ash Street, with her railway porter brother and his wife and young children. Some households must have been incredibly crowded. At 72, Curzon Street a brewer's labourer lived with his wife and their two babies. His two unmarried sisters, Emma and Jane Wynant, both milliners, lodged with him, as did his wife's brother who earned his living as a butler.

Marriage did not assure a couple of a home of their own. 25 year old Karoline Hull, a dressmaker, and her husband, a domestic servant, lodged just down the road from the Wynant household, at 28 Curzon Street, with a blacksmith and his wife and young son. Many widows and lone wives are to be found in lodgings along with their young children.

Sometimes it is tempting to speculate how women came to get their jobs. Thomas Bassett, a widowed framework knitter lived at 22, Gladstone Street with his three daughters. Next door lived a Jewish tailor, Solomon Weinberg with his wife and six school age children. Was it Solomon Weinberg who had found employment for the three motherless Bassett girls as tailoresses, or was it their gentile neighbour, James Griffin, also a tailor, at number 28?

Families still tended to help each other. In the Hill family home, at 6, Northgate Street, for example, Mary Jane employed her younger sister Kate, as her apprentice, while in Sidmouth, Mary Coles employed her 16 year old daughter, Annie, as an apprentice to the dressmaking and to help mind her two younger siblings.

Many streets had clusters of dressmakers - there were seven dressmakers in Knighton Street, five each in Aylestone Street and Carlton Street, seven in Chestnut Street and eight in Walnut Street, for example. It is not at all clear how they were all employed or by whom. Possibly this too was the result of informal networking, with women putting in a word with their employers to find posts for their neighbours.

Conclusion

The ratio of dressmakers to potential clients increased in all four places in our sample. In 1841 Leicester had one firm per +/-127 members of the female population; by 1861 there was apparently only one per 340, but by 1881 it was one per 60. Such calculations are meaningless for the three other places as they all served rural districts as well as the towns' own populations. On the basis of the figures alone it would seem that Leicester firms employed increasing numbers of employees - an average of less than 2 per firm in 1841, rising to 10 in 1861 and 1881, for example. However, this is an inappropriate way of interpreting the increase in numbers. The detail of the 1861 and 1881 census returns would suggest that the figures actually represent an increase in the numbers of women working on their own account, or with the help of a single apprentice or assistant. Many of these individuals do not seem to have felt the need to have a directory entry and so do not appear as 'firms' which in fact they were. At the same time, some large firms, especially in cities like Leicester, were employing far more than ten women in their workrooms.

The census evidence for all four places shows a remarkably similar pattern in respect of the age make-up of the workforce, their living arrangements, and the social classes from which they came.

For the most part, very young girls were not employed, though in Leicester the percentage did rise from under 1% in 1841 to nearly 3% in 1881. Throughout, the majority of women in the trade were in their twenties, with - logically - about half as many in the 15-20 age group. By the time they reached their 30s, about half had left the trade. In 1841 and 1861 the numbers dropped again as the women reached their 40s, but in 1881, in all the towns in the sample, there was a slight increase. Only a handful of women still worked after their 60th birthday.

Most dressmakers lived with either their birth or marital families. It is impossible to be sure of the numbers for 1841, but by 1861, in all the places under review, the figure was +/-70%. The number had dropped slightly in Leicester by 1881 because of the increase in workers living-in, but it was still nearly 60%. In the smaller towns living-in was less necessary and more women still lived at home.

In Leicester in 1861, and 1881, approximately a third of dressmakers were married; in Melton Mowbray and Sidmouth the figure was closer to a quarter, while in Ulverston it was only 1 in 7. In 1841, comparatively few dressmakers had young children, but by 1861 almost two-thirds of Leicester's married dressmakers had one or more children of school age or below. The percentage was similar in the smaller towns. By 1881 it had dropped to +/-50%.

Many dressmakers lived alone or headed their own households. In 1841 almost a third of dressmakers in Leicester, Sidmouth and Ulverston were in this position. By 1861 it was roughly 1 in 12 in Leicester, 1 in 8 in Melton, 1 in 4 in Sidmouth and 1 in 9 in Ulverston. In 1881 the figures were Leicester and Ulverston, 1 in 10; Melton and Sidmouth, 1 in 8. The apparent decrease was probably due to the greater number of dressmakers trading, and the increase in the percentage of married women, rather than to any other factors. The actual numbers of lone dressmakers, or women heading households, remains fairly consistent over the 40 year time span in each place.

In Leicester, the numbers of women who boarded with families or lived with their employers decreased slightly - from 1 in 7 in 1841 to 1 in 10 in 1861 and 1881. In the smaller towns of Melton and Sidmouth, only a small number of women ever boarded - in Sidmouth in 1841, and in both Melton and Sidmouth in 1861, the number was roughly 1 in 20. By 1881 workers were more mobile, more women travelled to seek work, and the percentages of dressmakers boarding increased in both places to approximately 1 in 8. Ulverston, isolated and unfashionable, did not attract many workers from far afield, but local girls wishing to train in town had no option but to board - their homes were miles away across the fells in villages and isolated farmhouses. One dressmaker in 7 boarded in Ulverston in 1841; by 1861 and 1881 it was 1 in 5, and of these, most lived with their employers.

If the picture of the fictional dressmaker living far from family and friends proves inaccurate, so too does that of the genteel dressmaker. In all four towns, the majority of dressmakers came from group 3. In both Leicester and Melton, at each census, group 3 was larger than the sum of groups 1 and 2, though in real terms a significant number of women did belong to both those groups. In Sidmouth and Ulverston, which were more isolated, inward-looking communities, the balance was slightly different, and more girls from apparently respectable families in groups 1 and 2 went into the trade.

Perhaps most importantly, dressmakers emerge from the census as real people with names and relationships. Some of their houses still stand. We can only guess at the tensions that must have existed

in overcrowded, impoverished households, full of hungry children and exhausted adults, or at respectable spinsters' attempts to live genteelly, or at the efforts members of the working class made to provide their children with decent jobs. It is dangerous to speculate too wildly, but historical understanding does not come without some exercise of the imagination. The census provides a factual basis for this.

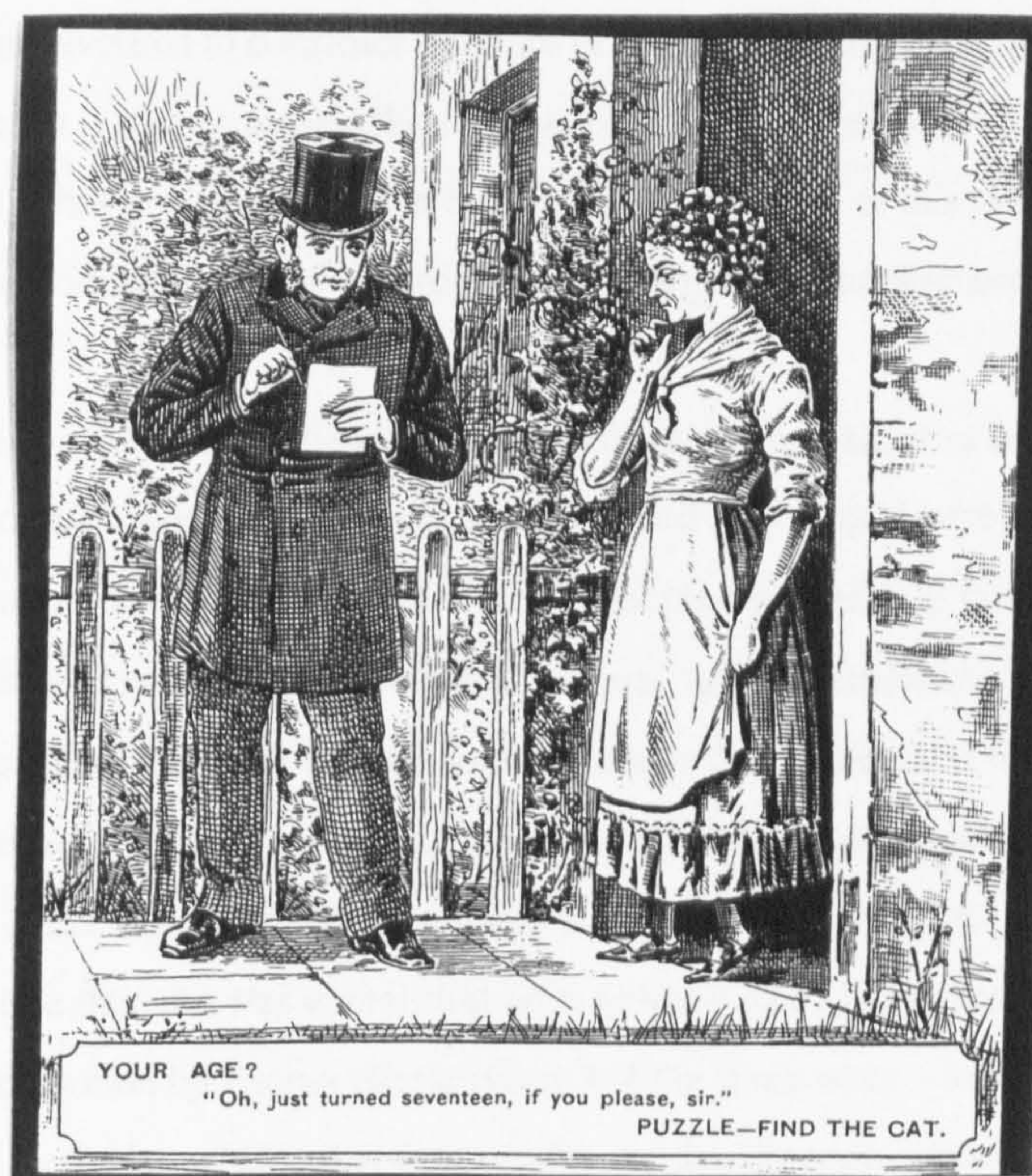


Plate 85. Puzzle submitted to Stationer's Hall in 1891. It shows a census enumerator asking a young woman her age. This was still considered to be an extremely delicate question.

Conclusion

'Is Fashion such a trifling thing? Or, as we think, do these signs constitute evidence in depth concerning the energies, possibilities, demands and joie de vivre of a given society, economy and civilisation? Costume is a language. It is no more misleading than the graphs drawn by demographers and price historians'

(Ferdinand Braudel, Capitalism and Material Life, 1973)¹

In this thesis I have endeavoured to construct a picture of the dressmaking trade. It is a jigsaw with many pieces missing - indeed, it is more a mosaic than a jigsaw in that the pieces of evidence do not all fit neatly together. Nonetheless, it has proved possible to build a coherent picture of this trade, despite the fact that it produced no key individuals, left few records and was largely un-mechanised.

The pieces of my mosaic come from many sources - letters, diaries, account books, business records, censuses, trades directories, government reports, novels and paintings. There is no single key source. Different sources are important for different areas of the picture, and it is the aggregate of pieces of information that is telling. However, not all evidence is equal, and it is important to be able to recognise which pieces carry the most weight for certain areas of study. For example, if we look at long hours of work, the most important document is probably young Elizabeth Stone's letter to her sister-in-law². Elizabeth was writing of her experience of the immediate past and she had no particular agenda other than to explain to her relative that she was embarking on a new venture (and perhaps, obliquely, to solicit financial aid). Memoirs written by former dressmakers tell the same story - but as seen through a filter of years and informed by the knowledge that times could change. Accounts published by the Children's Employment Commissioners provide corroborative evidence, but they were not unbiassed. The interviews were given and reported with a clear aim. The respondents wanted their plight known; the commissioners wanted to precipitate reform. Descriptions in novels and paintings of exhausted work girls often reflected conditions accurately, but nonetheless were fiction, even when that fiction was created for the express purpose of highlighting conditions. Taken together, however, such layers of evidence reinforce each other and create a complete picture.

Not only is it possible to create a picture, it is also possible to show how that picture changed over the course of a hundred years.

¹ Quoted in McKendrick, Neil, Brewer, John and Plumb, J H, The Birth of a Consumer Society. the Commercialization of 18th Century England (1982) p.34

² See chapter two, p. 95

The 1870s saw the most significant changes for dressmakers. The slump that began in the mid-1870s affected a large sector of the trade. But for a privileged number, the development of department store workrooms provided a new and respectable way of gaining a training in comparatively favourable conditions. The spread of department stores to towns and cities across the country, coupled with increasing ease of transport as the railway network grew, offered workwomen unprecedented mobility and opportunity. New inventions like paper patterns, sewing machines and dressmakers' lay figures at once simplified dressmaking and made possible extremely complex designs. A burgeoning trade press aided the spread of new fashions, equipment and information. New ideas about cutting and measuring spread from the tailoring trade and from across the Atlantic and created opportunities for enterprising women to capitalise on their dressmaking skills. The decade also saw more opportunities available to young women, and fewer of them turned to dressmaking. Job advertisements of the 1870s and 1880s stressed good conditions and high wages. There was, in fact, a shortage of trained dressmakers. This was partly because of the abuse of the apprenticeship system over the previous decades. Employers had taken their apprentices' premiums, but had not taught them the trade. Apprentices had been held back so that they would have to continue as poorly paid improvers, or they were allowed to become skilled at only some parts of the work³. Education in the new technical schools or at evening classes promised to change all that but in fact it simply delayed the age at which girls could begin to earn. Most of these developments have been noted separately by other authors, but so far as I am aware, no-one has previously identified the importance to the trade of this great watershed in the 1870s.

Similarly, though much has been written about the development of the sewing machine, previous writers have not looked at the testimony of the professionals who used the machines, and nor have they examined the end products those machines created. By examining these sources I have been able to open up new perspectives on the use, and limitations, of early sewing machines.

What makes a study of the dressmaking trade unique is that it was a trade carried on almost entirely by women, exclusively for women. Furthermore, the women who entered the profession were often exceptionally able and highly trained. This study has rescued a few of these individuals from obscurity. Some, like Mrs Downer or Mme Clapham, were clearly appreciated in their own lifetimes. Others are now known simply because of the chance survival of documents. And at least one - Marie Schild - has proved to be a woman of exceptional energy, productivity and importance. For whatever reason, her

³ Op cit, Tyler and Powers, (1999), p.15

contribution to fashion has gone largely unrecognised, and yet, for fifty years she developed an empire, providing paper patterns, fashion magazines and a whole range of goods and services. Other trained dressmakers used their skills in similar ways, though not always with the same degree of success. The importance of these women as pioneers in the world of commerce, albeit a small corner of it, has not previously been appreciated.

This study also provides an unique test bed for theories about women's place in history. For many years male historians wrote women out of the history books. The belief that women were totally subsumed by the male-dominated world in which they lived still creates many misunderstandings about the position of 19th century women who were in business on their own account⁴. For widows or unmarried women over the age of 21, there were no legal problems about running a business - though if a patriarchal father interfered in his adult daughter's affairs, that daughter would probably have considered it her duty to obey him. But legally, adult single women had control of their own money. For married women, particularly deserted wives, the problems were greater. Legally, they could not own property, make contracts, sue or be sued. They needed their husbands' authorisation for such basic transactions as renting property or opening a bank account, and if they did not know his whereabouts, they effectively became non-persons where financial affairs were concerned. No doubt women in this position had little option but to work for someone else. However, married women whose husbands were prepared to support them had no particular problems in establishing a business - Mrs Dinsdale, Mrs Carmichael and Mme Chaffard, Mrs Pattinson, Mrs Allinson, Mrs Downer, Mme Clapham and numerous others apparently ran their affairs quite successfully⁵. No doubt there were men who did not wish their wives to work - though few husbands in the social bracket from which most dressmakers came could have afforded to deny their wives' earning potential. There probably were idle husbands who lived off their wives' earnings, and men who drank and gambled their wives' profits away, but there is nothing to suggest that these men were in the majority. In various places up to the 18th century, the guilds had recognised the principle of women trading as 'femme sole', though by the 19th century this privilege had disappeared almost everywhere. Nonetheless, by 1790 it was possible for a woman to establish her legal right to keep the proceeds of her own business for furthering the running of that business - though how often this law was

⁴ For example E P Thompson in The Making of the English working Class (1980) makes no mention of women working on their own account.

⁵ All these people are described elsewhere in the text, see pp. 85, 94-8, 102-7 and 356-64 1 and 363-372

invoked it is impossible to determine⁶. Certainly, despite their lack of political and legal status, a great many women managed to trade perfectly successfully. It would be useful to have more comparative case studies for other trades.

Studies like this rescue some of these women from obscurity. The dressmakers and milliners of 19th century Britain were not all nameless and faceless: a surprisingly large number have left records behind them. They wrote letters and had their photographs taken. (Plates 86 and 87) They employed staff, despatched bills and fell foul of the law. They advertised in newspapers and sent promotional material to their clients. Magazines were written for them and advertisers courted them. Their customers remembered them and they were described in diaries and correspondence. A burgeoning Victorian bureaucracy kept track of them through censuses, tax returns and commissions of enquiry. In fact, few people, of either gender, lived through the 19th century in Britain and left no mark.

The idea of certain skills being essentially female - that it was 'natural' for women to sew, cook, care for children and do housework - and conversely, that it was 'unnatural' for them to work at other things - is usually thought to have been a Victorian construct, part of the same philosophy that idealised woman as 'the angel in the home' and at the same time disapproved of any role she might try to play outside it. Catherine Hall attributes the rise of this attitude to the influence of evangelical writers in the 1830s⁷. As we have seen from Richard Campbell, however, such ideas had gained currency in some quarters by the middle of the 18th century. Nonetheless, the idea of 'separate spheres' was well understood by Victorian men.

'--- she has her sphere; let her work be found in it. If she feed us, clothe us, bring us into the world, educate us, nurse us and make a home what it ought to be, this is her work; and if it be done properly, surely she will have enough to do'

wrote Charles Bray in 1857⁸. Middle class women's lives were certainly constrained by this attitude, but few working class families could afford to keep their womenfolk confined to unremunerative household duties. Within this class, dressmaking tended to attract girls from respectable families who could afford to pay apprenticeship premiums. Naturally, not all apprentices were enthusiastic about the profession, but

⁶ Op cit, Baker (1996) p.859

⁷ Hall, Catherine, 'The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology' in White, Male and Middle Class. explorations in feminism and history, (1992)

⁸ Bray, Charles, The Industrial Employment of Women (1857) (pamphlet)

dressmaking did attract those girls with talent and ambition who hoped to 'better themselves', as well as the ones (deplored by moralists) who simply had an interest in nice clothes. There were few alternatives open to them.

Dressmaking was an acceptable occupation because it was apparently an extension of 'domestic' skills. Ladies sewed; they did fancy work and many of them also did plain sewing, making at least some of their own underclothes, shirts for their menfolk and garments for their children, mending tears and rents, sewing on buttons and altering trimmings. But dressmaking, for most of our period, was actually a very different chore. Patterns were complex and dresses had to fit, while shirts and underwear were voluminous and made from basic geometric shapes that simply required diligence to put together neatly. Some ladies, and some working women, made their own everyday print frocks and wrappers, but best dresses, cut from narrow breadths of expensive silk, were usually professionally made throughout our period. And as we have seen, many working class women could not sew and so had their clothes made professionally. Dressmakers were skilled tradeswomen, providing a service that many of their clients could not undertake for themselves.

This brings us to a very important point. Women's paid, non-domestic work has usually been regarded as essentially temporary - a way of filling the gap between childhood and marriage and accumulating a little capital with which to start married life - and this has been used to explain the relatively lowly status accorded to it⁹. But dressmaking required a lengthy training. The minimum period for a formal apprenticeship was two years, and many women served longer. Many of them paid for the privilege and some went on to further unpaid, or poorly paid, training as improvers. A study of dressmakers therefore leads us to question this nostrum about women's work. Few individuals would have invested so much time and money in acquiring skills that would be discarded on marriage. It is reasonable to assume that women who trained as dressmakers expected to work for most of their lives, either within marriage or without it. Furthermore, by providing them with apprenticeship premiums, their families, or, in the case of charity children, their communities, encouraged and legitimised this decision.

However, higher up the social spectrum, dressmakers remained something of an enigma. Many ran establishments which were frequented by the wives, daughters and sisters of gentlemen - yet the idea of

⁹ See Turbin, Carole, 'Beyond Conventional Wisdom: Women's Wage Work, Household Economic Contribution and Labor Activism in a Mid Nineteenth Century Working-Class Community' in Groneman, Carol and Norton, Mary Beth (eds) 'To Toil the Livelong Day' American Women at Work (1987)

the respectable working woman was one with which gentlemen were uncomfortable. Dressmakers operated within the male-dominated world of commerce, but formed a closed enclave within it. This separation was threatening to male power, and the fact that some dressmakers, albeit very few, were successful and independent was even more worrying. This partially accounts for the way they were so often portrayed in fiction as seducers and matchmakers, and for the stereotype of the dressmaker-prostitute. It was unjust, but it was a psychological way of neutralising a perceived threat.

This study illuminates the lives of real dressmakers. It enables us to know who they were, what their working lives were like, what they earned, how they got on with their clients and what success and status they enjoyed.

Elizabeth Sanderson has shown that the women who entered the trade in Edinburgh in the 18th and early 19th centuries were sometimes gentlewomen, the daughters and sisters of professional men or minor gentry; they entered the trade willingly, and usually with the support of their kinsfolk¹⁰. The girls who went into the trade in England, however, were more likely to be the daughters of tradesmen and craftsmen, shopkeepers and labourers, factory workers and farmers. According to Ms Monroe, writing in 1879, some dressmakers offered formal classes, but these, she was careful to stress, were for ladies' maids and milliners' assistants wishing to go into business on their own account, and *'naturally, such associates are objectionable to private people'*. Her brief was to drum up business for the *'Ladies' Dress Making and Embroidery Association'* which had workrooms open six and a half days a week which ladies could attend (at one guinea a month or five guineas for six months) to learn the basics of the craft¹¹, but the social distinction she makes is revealing and gives the lie to the idea of the genteel dressmaker's apprentice so popular in fiction.

However, this belief in dressmaking being the occupation of impoverished gentlewoman died hard, and articles like the one in *The Sempstress*, on the Distressed Needlewomen's Home (supported by the Distressed Needlewomen's Society which also produced the magazine) reinforced it. The inmates were not, of course, all dressmakers, but some were.

'Very many it has assisted who once enjoyed the comforts of life, and had at their command the carriage, the servant, etc: but, from causes over which they have had no control, have been reduced to penury and want --- Many of the parties assisted are officers' daughters

¹⁰ Op cit, Sanderson, *Costume* 20 (1986)

¹¹ At 42, Somerset Street, London. See the front cover of op cit, Monroe, (1879)

*and widows, clergymens' daughters and widows, and widows and daughters of those who have been independent ---*¹².

(Plate 88) The value of this study of census data is that it enables us, categorically, despite such assertions, to know that the majority of dressmakers actually came from what can loosely be described as working class homes. Many were members of the small tradesmen/craftsmen class. Many came from the class below. A handful came from semi-professional families and about a third cannot be placed in any social category because they lived apart from their families. It is possible, even probable, that some of these were the stereotypical genteel women fallen on hard times. It seems fair to deduce that such women formed a minority of the work force, but it is possible that, like middle class families today, they were more adept at finding support services than were their less educated colleagues, hence the preponderance of them in the Distressed Needlewomens' Home.

It is crucial to our understanding of the trade to realise that most girls did not drift into dressmaking through poverty and ill fortune: they chose the most prestigious of the skilled trades open to young women, and, for the most part, they accepted the rigours that went with it. It was not an easy life, but then neither was working in a factory, or a shop, on a farm or in domestic service, doing laundry or knitting or making lace. The work itself was not especially arduous, but the key disadvantage was the crippling long hours which dressmakers were expected to work, at least at busy times of year. For the young woman who became ill but had no time to rest and recuperate, a dressmaking apprenticeship could be a death sentence. And - a bit like the consultants and junior doctors of our own time - senior women in the dressmaking trade expected their apprentices to go on enduring the same conditions that they themselves had experienced. But some - many - worked out their apprenticeships and moved up the trade. They became improvers, assistants, second and first hands, and their wages improved. Young Elizabeth Stone in Brighton, as a second hand in the middle years of the century, was offered £40 a year - quite a respectable wage. Lucks paid one of their first hands £120 a year in the 1890s, an excellent wage even by men's standards¹³. A pound a week was reckoned to be the basic living wage for a married man with a family for most of the 19th century and up to the First World War.

Some dressmakers saved, others married, or borrowed, or inherited, just enough money to set up in business on their own account. Some were successful. Many others, to judge by the rapid change-over

¹² Volume 1, October 1855 and was the only issue.

¹³ See chapter four, p. 164

of names in trades directories year by year, were not. We can only guess at the personal tragedies that lie behind those statistics. But the fact remained that, for those with reasonable stamina and ability, dressmaking offered women the possibility of a good wage, or even of running a business of their own. By the 1870s it also offered the opportunity for young women from modest backgrounds to travel to different parts of the country to work, a much more adventurous proposition at the end of the last century than it now seems. Dressmaking provided women who married with a respectable and flexible means of augmenting their husbands' income and of supporting themselves if they were widowed. At the very worst, women with a dressmaking training behind them were the ones most likely to be offered seamstress work when times were bad. Families whose daughters needed to work must have seen dressmaking as one of the more attractive options.

There were, of course, many different types of dressmaking establishment and many different types of client. Conditions, prices, wages and workrooms varied, and so did individuals' attitudes to their trade. But at every level the job required much the same skills, regardless of conditions in the workroom, the type of fabrics being sewn or the social status of the clientele. The universal experience of women working in the trade was the long hours - whether they were sewing wedding trousseaux for wealthy Edinburgh society ladies, making print gowns for Cornish servant girls or adapting patterns to fit stout, fussy, middle-aged ladies in the Lake District. Throughout the trade there were young women straining their eyesight, bending their backs and weakening their constitutions with long hours of toil in stuffy rooms polluted by smelly gas lights.

The rewards they reaped varied widely. To give just a few examples - Madam Clapham in Hull in the 1890s and Mrs Carmichael in Edinburgh in the 1860s enjoyed prestige and lived in comfort, even if they worked long hours and had undergone exhausting apprenticeships. Miss Goddard in Leicester in the 1830s or Mrs Turnock in Hanley in the 1880s, eking out their livings by moving from household to household to make and mend, dependent for subsistence on the generosity of their employers, had a much less enviable lot - but even they led a less miserable lives than did Mrs Faulder's hapless apprentice in Manchester or Miss Reeves' 'friend' in Birmingham in the 1860s. Bessie Conway of Handsacre in altering Susanna Ingleby's four dresses for 10s in September 1870 was probably making a significant addition to her family's income that month; sixty years earlier Agnes Dow in Leith, who had often charged more than that for a single hat, went bankrupt. Circumstances altered cases¹⁴.

¹⁴ All these references are to people who appear elsewhere in this thesis, see pp. 60-1, 91, 94-7, 105, 153
(and 365

It is interesting to note that many dressmakers seem to have been on surprisingly equal terms with their customers. Of course, there were problem clients who would not or could not pay, who constantly changed their minds, or who had unreasonable expectations of what their dressmakers could do for them. But on the other hand, there were dressmakers who were less than obliging, or who (we are told by the likes of Mrs Haweis, Ada Ballin and Ms Monroe¹⁵) bullied and overcharged their clients. Overall, however, for the relationship to continue, both client and dressmaker had to get on, and clearly some women forged lasting friendships that crossed the boundaries of class.

But whatever the advantages, dressmaking had a consistently bad press. One after another, young dressmakers in different parts of the country reported to the Children's Employment Commissioners how they worked past midnight for days or weeks on end, how they were ill-fed, unable to do anything other than work and constantly at the mercy of capricious employers. Contemporaries were rightly outraged; organisations were formed, articles were written and printed, novels were penned and pictures painted. But none of them made any immediate difference. The Song of the Shirt was a classic; references to it were readily understood half a century after it was written. But for most people, it was fiction, as were Mrs Gaskell's novels, or Mrs Stone's, or the Religious Tract Society's. The connection between the overworked milliner's assistant in a story, and the girls who worked for the reader's own dressmaker, was hard to make, and lady readers had not been taught to be critical of what they read. Anna Blunden's or Richard Redgrave's or Millais' paintings were affecting - but they did not, the viewer was vaguely aware, depict 'real' workers¹⁶.

It is unlikely that many ladies wanted to cause young women to be overworked, and no doubt many heeded the pleas of the Association for the Aid and Benefit of Dressmakers and Milliners and its successors to order their dresses well in advance of need - at least when it did not inconvenience them too much to do so. Even The Sempstress admitted that

'It may occasionally happen that circumstances beyond our control will oblige us to give a hasty order, but do we never, without such necessity, defer sending a dress to be made up until the last moment ---?.'

¹⁵ See chapter six, pp. 239-40

¹⁶ See chapter 1, pp. 47-48, plates 8-18

It was an implicit, class-based assumption, even among the reformers of the Distressed Needlewomen's Society, that in extremis, a lady's 'need' for a new dress took precedence over her dressmaker's need for sleep.

Magazine articles described working conditions, but in fact, Victorian society colluded in keeping supposedly sensitive ladies in ignorance of any unpleasantness that might distress or disturb them. Dressmakers kept their workroom doors firmly closed, and any pale consumptive little apprentices stayed well out of sight. Even in the 1920s, Mme Clapham 'lost' apprentices in cupboards and passages when the inspectors called¹⁷. There is a contemporary parallel in the purchase of garments made in third world countries. No amount of television documentaries or magazine articles on sweat shops in the Far East has had any noticeable effect on sales of cheap Indian 'hippie' clothes, or of designer-label goods made in Thailand or Korea. We are driven by many imperatives when buying our clothes but charity is not usually the chief of them.

And clothes were disproportionately important in the 19th century. As we have seen, fashionably dressed wives and daughters, paying and receiving calls, leaving cards and drinking tea, demonstrated - to other fashionably dressed wives and daughters, similarly engaged - the social position to which their family aspired. Society was mobile and many people were anxious to move up the social strata rather faster than their means would allow. 'Poverty' wrote 'Sylvia' *'should never have the appearance of poverty'* - a stricture which applied equally to the genteel lady fallen on hard times and the tradesman's wife trying to move onto the next rung of the social ladder¹⁸. Dress proclaimed to the world the social pretensions of its wearer.

But clothes had many meanings. Too great an interest in dress was a sign of vanity, and vanity was sinful. Modesty in dress, by which Victorian writers meant plain dresses in drab colours (greys, beiges, browns, soft blues and greens and the ubiquitous black) was much praised. Trimmings were to be muted and kept to a minimum. There was a good deal of inverted snobbery in this; fabrics were to be good quality; lace and jewellery should be old and real - cheap machine made lace and Birmingham made trinkets were readily available, so they were to be avoided. Bright colours and loud patterns were vulgar and suggested that their wearer was, too. But on the other hand, shabby clothes, or clothes that had been mended too

¹⁷ Op cit, Tyler and Parsons, (1999) p.16

¹⁸ Op cit, Sylvia, (1876) p.10

often or too obviously, also branded their wearer as being unable to keep up appearances and therefore socially undesirable.

At the same time clergymen, and books of domestic economy, preached the virtues of thrift in all areas of expenditure. Household items were made to last, and even wealthy families had pans re-bottomed and broken china mended with rivets. Clothes had to last through several re-makes. Even well-to-do ladies tended to have limited clothing allowances for which they usually had to account to their husbands or fathers - hence the keeping of personal account books. Anything that could be regarded as unnecessary extravagance was likely to incur censure. There was thus economic, moral and social pressure to keep expenditure on dress to a minimum. This in turn affected the prices that all but the most elite of dressmakers could expect to charge. Writers like Ms Monroe might accuse dressmakers of charging excessive rates, but few surviving bills substantiate this. The key to the trade's problem was that most dressmakers charged too little.

This study indicates the types of businesses which were most likely to succeed. Small businesses tended to be more viable than large ones. For example, two women on their own, both working, with an unpaid apprentice or one who was paid only a few shillings a month, could manage reasonably well. Between them they could make three or four dresses a week from which they could earn at least 15s or £1. If a family could live adequately on £1 a week, so could two ladies, even with a live-in apprentice and a maid -of-all-work to pay. Working on such a small scale they could even afford to take on temporary help at busy times - the extra work would more than pay for itself. Married women whose husbands were in work tended to be even more successful. Like Mrs Pattinson in Ulverston, they could make a temporary loss but still continue to trade because there was a second income to tide them over. Profits from dressmaking under these circumstances were often enhanced by the sale of ready-made goods and haberdashery.

Even work people could live quite comfortably if conditions were right. Meyer and Black quoted the case of two sisters of eighteen and twenty-one in 1908 who worked together '*in the workroom of a well known shop*' earning 18s and 7s respectively, with overtime at 6d an hour. They lived together in one room '*paying 4s-6d for it, keep it beautifully and are very comfortable on their joint income of 25s a week*'.¹⁹ They were almost certainly exceptional.

¹⁹ Op cit, Meyer and Black, (1909), pp.71-2

The economics of a large workroom were much more difficult to manage than those of a small concern. Even the department store workrooms do not seem to have made much actual profit, but, as we have seen, they had a different *raison d'être* and brought profit to their owners in other ways. To judge by the records that survive, a modest workroom in the latter years of the century containing a first hand, a second hand, four improvers/assistants and two unpaid apprentices, would have had an annual wages bill of at least £120 (£60 for the first hand, £20 for the second and £10 each for the others). The apprentices would not have done much actual making, but they would have lightened the load for the six others, by picking up pins, threading needles, tidying up, making tea, and doing jobs like sewing on buttons and brush braid. Assuming that the owner, rather than another member of staff, liaised with customers, discussing styles, looking at fashion plates, advising, measuring and trying on - all time-consuming jobs, but the part of the process that many customers enjoyed and which therefore could not be hurried - the workroom staff would have been free to concentrate on making.

Six needlewomen, dividing the tasks between them according to skill and experience, and served by the apprentices, could comfortably make twelve ordinary dresses (or their equivalent) a week, working a ten hour day and a 5 ½ day week²⁰. If those dresses were charged for at the standard rate of 5s²¹ each, the firm would have made £156 pa, giving the owner a 'profit' of just £36 a year out of which to rent her premises, feed (if not house) her eight staff and live herself. It was not an economic proposition - hence the bankruptcies of the likes of James Binnington and George Nicholson in York²². Working on the same basis - an average of two dresses a week per workwoman, costed at 5s each - each hand 'earned' the establishment for which she worked £26 a year, assuming, of course, that demand always matched capacity. To make a profit, therefore, the average wage paid to staff members had to be less than £26 pa, and/or the number of garments made per head per week had to increase. No amount of early ordering by clients could alter the fact that, for their labour to be economic, hands often had to produce more garments than was realistically possible - hence the extraordinarily long working hours. Demand was not regular and an average two garments a head per week could only be achieved by balancing out weeks when hands made less than one garment each with weeks when they made three or four or even more.

²⁰ Estimate based on day books, the 1887 interview in the Liverpool Review, Hannah Mitchell's memories and personal experience of making museum replicas. An article in Once A Week, August 20th, 1864, p.232, gave 8 hours 27 minutes as the time taken to make a silk dress by hand, but presumably this was a relatively plain garment, and no time was allowed for fitting or altering.

²¹ This seems to be an appropriate average.

²² See chapter three, pp. 146-8

It took a woman with a good head for business to run a workroom efficiently and profitably. Given that most dressmakers had had only an elementary education, and that an elementary education (especially for girls) included only very basic arithmetic, it is amazing that any of them were successful. Nonetheless, even in department stores, the head of the workroom, who had responsibility for taking orders, costing them and getting work out on time, as well as for the quality of workmanship and the division of labour amongst the various members of staff, was almost always a woman.

Wages remained low for a number of reasons. As we have seen, women's wages generally were lower than men's and there was no expectation that it should be otherwise. Widows and older spinsters were penalised by this, but they were a minority of the workforce. Dressmaking was virtually the only craft trade open to women so there was no community of craftswomen with whom to compare pay scales, and no tradition of parity with skilled male workers. Dressmakers compared their salaries (probably quite favourably) to those of unskilled and semi-skilled women. And because there were comparatively few jobs which were open to women, those areas in which women could find reasonably good employment were likely to be oversubscribed. There were usually more dressmaking firms than the market could support, so, to compete, proprietors offered, not just quality, but cheap rates and speedy service. These inevitably led to low pay and long hours, but the workwomen were unable to protest because there were plenty of unemployed hands able and willing to take their places.

In the union sense, dressmaking was never an organised trade. Workers were isolated and many worked in their own homes - the type of situation that even today defies attempts at unionisation. Women in live-in posts, even in department stores, were subject to strict rules imposed by their employers and risked losing their place of residence as well as their jobs if they disobeyed them. Even in the late 1880s Hannah Mitchell's employer forbade her staff to attend a meeting about reducing hours. They defied her, only to find her sitting in the front row, pretending to support the motion²³. To women who had no political power, the concept of political action was often foreign, or even morally suspect, and the exceptional length of the working day left dressmakers' assistants particularly short of time and energy with which to agitate for improved conditions.

Another reason for low wages was probably 'custom and practice'. Ladies became used to paying a certain price for their clothes and were unwilling to accept price rises, particularly in a period when

²³ Op cit, Mitchell, (1977), pp. 75-77

inflation was not general. In an oversubscribed market this left little room for manoeuvre. There was also increasing competition from ready-to-wear clothing. At the beginning of our period, ready-made goods were usually produced for poorer customers. Respectable people patronised a bespoke tailor or dressmaker. The quality of ready-to-wear clothing improved as the century progressed - by the 1870s department stores were selling considerable quantities of good ready-made garments to a middle class clientele. Some firms had clothes made specially for them. Others (like Bainbridges of Newcastle) had their own factories or had their workroom staff make up models for stock. As more and more services for home dressmakers were offered in the 1860s and 70s this, too, may have affected the bespoke trade.

Dressmaking did not have to be an impoverished profession. In America, economic conditions were similar to those in the UK, but status, wages and prices were higher. Mary Molloy in Minnesota was the daughter of Irish immigrants but she rose to be one of St Paul's most influential businesswomen and was listed in the Blue Book of the twin cities in 1907²⁴. Carrie Taylor in Kentucky had a college degree, but saw dressmaking as a respectable way of earning a living and was also a noted local hostess²⁵. From Elizabeth Ashridge in 18th century New York, buying herself out of a miserable apprenticeship with wages earned doing extra sewing (*'then I fell to my needle, by which I could maintain myself handsomely'*) to the two old ladies in A Mistaken Charity who fled an old peoples' home to return to their dressmaking, Americans seem to have viewed dressmaking as a means to independence rather than a route to poverty²⁶. In England, few 18th century apprentices had time for extra sewing, and most old ladies lucky enough to find themselves in a charitable institution other than the workhouse would have been quite happy to stay put.

However, it is misleading to see dressmaking conditions as a purely female problem. The parallels with the tailoring trade were very close. Live-in journeymen tailors and male shop assistants were subject to their employers' dictates in much the same way as the women were. Tailoring unions, though they existed, were wholly unsuccessful in controlling wages and working conditions. Charles Kingsley's Alvin Locke experienced poverty, unemployment, unhealthy workrooms and excessive hours that were very similar

²⁴ Jerde, Judith 'Mary Molloy: St Paul's Extraordinary Dressmaker', Dress 7 (1981) The 'Blue Books' listed local people of note.

²⁵ Clark, Sallye, 'Carrie Taylor: Kentucky Dressmaker', Dress 6 (1980)

²⁶ See Some Account of the Forepart of the Life of Eliza Ashridge (Swarthmore Collection) and Freeman, Mary Williams, A Mistaken Charity (1887)

to those described by many young dressmakers²⁷. Men were no more anxious to pay a proper price for their clothes than women were. Small town drapers made even less profit from their tailoring than they did from their dressmaking. The fact that dressmakers were women may have added an extra dimension to their problems, but it was not their cause.

The dressmaking trade was a product of its era, and when times were hard dressmakers suffered along with the rest of the workforce. Between 1880 and 1914, for example, 'sweating' was rife, and dressmakers' wages were the lowest they had been in fifty years. Again, however, this was not exclusively a women's problem. There was an oversubscribed labour market, and the four decades of depression that led up to the Great War had seen an overall decline in the rates paid to tradesmen and a general lowering of respect for craft skills²⁸. Dressmakers were not uniquely under-privileged; they were caught up in the tenor of the times.

The combination of moral and economic pressure from customers to keep expenditure on clothing as low as possible made it unlikely that garment workers could ever be well paid. Even the establishment of Wage Boards in the early years of this century, and the great social catalyst that was the First World War, did not really improve dressmakers' conditions. Helen Bagrie in Aberdeen and Mme Clapham in Hull paid their staff appallingly even in the 1930s, and as late as the 1980s May Verita, working for herself, seldom earned more than £1 an hour. Wages in 'the rag trade' are still notoriously low.

However, in a world in which they were heavily disadvantaged, dressmaking provided many women with a lifeline. It enabled them to augment the family income, to provide for their children if they were widowed or deserted, or simply to live independently. It was a trade they could take up and drop at will. They were poorly paid, but not in comparison with other women workers. For decades, women's wages would remain much lower than men's. Of the three million women in full-time work at the time of the 1911 census, for example, a million earned less than 12s a week, and a further million-and-a-half earned between 12s and 15s. Of the thirteen million men in full-time work only 4% earned under 15s, and 8% earned 15s-20s, while the majority - 62% - earned 20s-35s²⁹. In this context we should not judge

²⁷ Kingsley, Charles, Alton Locke (1850)

²⁸ See, for example, Tressell, Robert, The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist (written c.1906, published 1955)

²⁹ Fabian Society pamphlet no 178, The War, Women and Unemployment

dressmaking simply on its profits. Its exponents may have been badly paid and overworked but this does not detract from the craft skills most of them developed, the real artistry that some of them showed, the managerial ability of many workroom heads or the entrepreneurial endeavours of a significant minority. Women in high class firms were often proud of their status, even if their financial rewards were low³⁰. Working class women who made clothes for their neighbours had a skill which defined their worth in the community, benefited their families and could be traded for reciprocal services as well as for money³¹.

But though we may have begun to appreciate the contributions of 19th century dressmakers, much work remains to be done. We still know remarkably little about their 18th century predecessors, the milliners and mantua makers, and even less about the women who first began to take over the making of women's garments from the tailors in the latter years of the 17th century. The mosaic is still incomplete.

³⁰ The 'Bagriettes' for example, see op cit, Whyte (1982)

³¹ See Buckley, Cheryl, 'On the Margins: Theorising the History and Significance of Making and Designing Clothes at Home' in op cit, Burman (1999) for a discussion of this in a 20th century context.

Plate 86 (opposite)

Members of the dressmaking department at May Duff's of Cavendish Street, Ulverston, c.1895. Miss Duff trained in Dublin and set up in business on her own account in Ulverston in 1890. She styled herself 'court dressmaker' and had showrooms and fitting rooms in Paris, Lancaster and Whitehaven. A major part of her business was making copies of French model gowns. She was remembered as a caring but strict employer by two old ladies, Miss Postlethwaite and Mrs Fell, who had worked for her and were interviewed by The News of Ulverston in 1980. She died in 1926. (*Ulverston Heritage Centre*)

Plate 87 (next page)

Members of the dressmaking department at Whitaker and Co of Royston, Hertfordshire, c.1900. They were, from left to right, back row, Miss Drage, Mrs F.Fardell, Mrs Sillence, Mrs F.Simons, Miss Pickett, Mrs Higgs and Miss Rayner; centre row, Miss H.Humphrey, Miss Richman, Miss L.Humphrey, Miss Fardell, Mrs Craft and Mrs C.Smith; front row, Miss N.Renaut, Mrs F.Greenhill. Mrs Foster and Mrs Amer. Their hours of work were 8.30am to 8pm three days a week and 8.30am to 9.30pm on the alternate three days. Apprentices were unpaid for their first two years and then received 5s a week, while experienced staff earned 12s-6d to £1. They were all dressed in their Sunday best, but the photograph was taken on a Thursday - a fact which the women were keen to stress, as neighbours criticised them for being photographed and at work on a Sunday!





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THE SEMPSTRESS.

No. I.]

OCTOBER, 1855.

[Price 1d.]



"Blessed is the man that provideth for the sick and needy, the Lord shall deliver him in time of trouble."

"Whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and setteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?"

LONDON:

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Plate 88. The front cover of the first, and apparently the only, issue of The Sempstress, October 1855

Appendix one

Susanna Ingleby and her expenditure on dress (1860-1889)

'Fashion is gentility running away from vulgarity, and afraid of being overtaken'
(William Hazlitt, Conversations of James Northcote, p.264)

This section was published as 'Buttons, braids, bones and body linings; a Staffordshire lady and her London dressmaker', Staffordshire History, Spring 1997, by Inder, Pamela and Aldis, Marion

It is possible to give a very detailed account of Mrs Ingleby's expenditure on dress. She kept diaries and account books, and belonged to a family that lived in large houses with plenty of storage space in which to hoard documents and possessions. I have spent several years working on Susanna Ingleby and her family and have co-authored several books and papers about them - including the one on which this section is based. It is important because of the insight it gives us into the way one individual dressed and the relationships she had with various dressmakers.

Mrs Susanna Ingleby was a Staffordshire gentlewoman who kept house for her widowed brother and his young son. She was the daughter of the Rev John Sneyd¹ and had been born at Basford Hall, a large house on the family estate, Ashcombe Park, near Leek, which her father inherited in 1851. She was the seventh of his fourteen children. She had grown up in a house full of servants - at the time of her birth her parents kept an indoor staff of twelve. There was a canary yellow carriage in the coach house which bore the family coat of arms on its doors. Her grandfather, who lived a mile or so away across the fields from Basford Hall at Ashcombe, the fine new house he had built when her father was a boy, had lived in even greater luxury. The Sneyds were an old established family, well-known and respected in North Staffordshire, and distantly related to the more illustrious Sneyd family of Keele. But in the 1850s they had lost all their money as a result of ill-advised mining speculation earlier in the century². In the aftermath of the disaster, tempers had run high, and John Sneyd had quarrelled with his eldest son, John William, and disinherited him. John William survived on the rents of a couple of farms and an allowance of £100 a year. He married in 1861, Agnes Cotton of Etwall Hall in Derbyshire, but she died just a year later, shortly after the birth of their first child, a son, grandly named Ralph De Tunstall Sneyd.

¹ Aldis, Marion and Inder, Pamela, A Scandal in the Parish. the misdemeanours of the Rev Gustavus Sneyd of Chastleton, (1998)

² See Aldis, Marion and Inder, Pamela, Muskets and Mining. the 1844 diary of John William Sneyd, (1996)

Susanna married the Rev Charles Ingleby, curate of Ellastone, who lived at Oakamoor. It was a tragic mistake. He was impotent and abusive, and both he and his elderly mother subjected Susanna to a reign of terror. Two months to the day after her wedding, on June 11th 1860, John Sneyd arrived at Oakamoor to rescue his daughter. Divorce was virtually unheard of at that date (though it had become possible by an Act passed in 1857) and an annulment would have necessitated Susanna undergoing a humiliating physical examination. Her father's solicitor forced through a legal separation under the terms of which she would receive an allowance of £100 a year from Charles Ingleby, which would rise to £150 a year when his mother died and he no longer had her to support. Mrs Ingleby in fact died in 1871; Charles Ingleby in 1873. More importantly, Susanna was also to retain her 'marriage settlement'³ - a lump sum of £8000 and a £50 pa allowance from her father.

For two years after her marriage broke down, Susanna lived with a sister and cousin in one of the houses on the family estate, keeping out of society as much as possible and trying to live down her disgrace. When it was clear that Agnes was not going to survive, John William wrote to her asking her to live with him and help raise his son '*It is*' he wrote sadly '*dear Agnes's wish as well as my own*'. Despite the fact that John Sneyd was no longer on speaking terms with his son, he raised no objections to his daughter going to him as housekeeper. They were to live in the house in Armitage that John William had rented as his marital home but had never lived in - it was out of visiting range of Ashcombe, and no doubt John Sneyd saw it as a way of solving two problems at the same time.

From the time she moved to Armitage, Susanna Ingleby kept meticulous accounts in separate books for household, personal, garden, coal and travel expenditure. It is her personal accounts that concern us here⁴. Susanna paid her brother, John William, £50 a year board and lodging. Armitage Cottage cost them £30 a year in rent and they employed a servant and a nursemaid for the baby at a cost of £12 and £8 a year⁵. They lived reasonably comfortably, though in circumstances much reduced from the life they had known as children at Basford Hall.

³ In the days when women lost all rights to their property and money on marriage, well-to-do families tried to protect their daughters by setting up marriage settlements. These consisted of lump sums - and sometimes an allowance as well - contributed by both the woman's birth and marital families. This money was put into a trust to be administered on the wife's behalf by trustees approved by both her husband and her own family. The choice of trustees was an important and delicate part of pre-nuptial planning.

⁴ Private collection

⁵ Susanna Ingleby's personal account book (private collection) and entry in her diary for May 3rd 1862.

For the eight years they lived at Armitage Cottage, Susanna, John William and little 'Ralphy' led an active social life. The Wilsons at the Rectory, the Birches at nearby Armitage Lodge, and Josiah Spode just down the road at Hawkesyard Park, were their closest companions, but they had numerous other friends and acquaintances, and their lives were a long round of dinners, concerts, picnics, croquet and archery parties, dances and other festivities. In 1870 they moved to Abbot's Bromley, to another rented house. Though only a few minutes away by car, they were out of reach of their Armitage friends, and had to establish a new social circle. They were older, Ralphy had gone away to school, and their social life became more sedate. In 1873, their father died. There was no deathbed reconciliation between father and son, John William remained disinherited of Ashcombe Park but was left the old family home, Basford Hall, and in 1874, he returned there with Susanna and the then twelve year old Ralph. Susanna had managed her money well, but she was anxious to leave a reasonable sum to Ralph, who could inherit little from his impoverished father. Over the years, particularly after their father's death, Susanna was called upon to bail out various of her relations, and in particular, her youngest brother, Gustavus. The Rev Gustavus Sneyd was Rector of Chastleton in Oxfordshire, but he was a profligate and dishonourable young man who cost his family much worry - and in Susanna's case - money⁶. Her annuity of £50 from her father had often not been paid, and she had been forced to dip into her capital to keep the household afloat. As her capital diminished, so did her income from its interest.

Neither she nor her brother could afford to live at Basford Hall. It was a large house, and had fallen into disrepair, the roof leaked, it was cold and isolated. Susanna managed it with the aid of just two servants - a drunken cook, and a maid of all work, and did much of the housework herself. They could not afford to entertain, both she and John William suffered frequent bouts of illness, - Susanna no longer needed a fashionable wardrobe.

We know so much about Susanna Ingleby because she kept diaries. These, together with diaries kept by her parents, grandfather and brothers are in Keele University library. Large collections of family papers survive in the hands of various Sneyd descendants. It is possible to chart her expenditure on dress in detail and to relate it to her changes of lifestyle.

But Susanna's papers tell us even more than that. Amongst a large collection of family letters and documents, we came upon a collection of bills from a dressmaker named Mrs Dinsdale to Mrs Susanna

⁶ Op cit, Aldis and Inder, (1998)

Ingleby. They are especially interesting because Susanna Ingleby's personal account book for the period 1866-85 survives, and contains details of everything she purchased - down to the last halfpenny on lemon drops or penny to a beggar. Susanna Ingleby's diaries even tell of the occasions on which she wore the dresses that Mrs Dinsdale - and her other dressmakers - made for her.

Susanna Ingleby seems to have been a skilled needlewoman. She records making shirts for her brothers, clothes for her young nephew, and garments for herself and helping out at various village schools teaching the girls to sew. On occasion she made or remade complete dresses. It is difficult to know how typical she was, but certainly many girls from well-to-do backgrounds did much of their own sewing. 'Best' dresses for middle and upper class women, however, were almost certainly made by dressmakers.

Susanna had a trousseau when she married in 1860, and many of her wedding presents were clothes and jewellery - she made a list of them in the back of her diary:-

<i>'Clement and Ellen</i>	<i>2 work'd P-hands [pocket handkerchiefs]</i>
<i>Aunt K, Cousins Eliza & Harriet</i>	<i>a brown silk dress</i>
<i>Aunt Mary</i>	<i>a blue silk dress</i>
<i>Robert</i>	<i>a linsey dress & a watch chain</i>
<i>Mrs Bradshaw</i>	<i>a bracelet ---</i>
<i>Mary</i>	<i>an opera cloak</i>
<i>Frederick</i>	<i>a parasol</i>
<i>Gustavus</i>	<i>a scarf</i>
<i>Ada</i>	<i>a brooch</i>
<i>Penelope</i>	<i>a shawl</i>
<i>Charles</i>	<i>a shawl, a work table, a bible, a brooch</i>
<i>Papa</i>	<i>an ornament for the neck £8-10s ---</i>
<i>Miss Parker</i>	<i>a pair of slippers</i>
<i>Wm</i>	<i>a ring ---</i>
<i>Mrs Ingleby</i>	<i>a set of pearl and amethyst ornaments ---</i>
<i>Mary Anne</i>	<i>collar and cuffs ---</i>
<i>Aunt Tom</i>	<i>collar and sleeves</i>
<i>Emma</i>	<i>a head dress ---</i>
<i>Louisa Bill</i>	<i>pins for the hair ---</i>
<i>Emily</i>	<i>a Honiton veil</i>
<i>Mrs Antrobus</i>	<i>a ring & pins for the hair</i>
<i>Mrs Cowell</i>	<i>a wreath ---</i>
<i>Mrs Heathcote</i>	<i>a drab silk dress ---</i>
<i>Uncle John</i>	<i>a brooch ---</i>
<i>Miss Blagg</i>	<i>some pairs of cuffs⁷</i>

⁷ Clement, William and Mary-Anne were cousins; Robert was the Rev Robert Bamford, her brother-in-law, widower of her sister Harriet, and the clergyman who performed the wedding service; Mary was her step-mother; Frederick, Gustavus, Ada, Penelope and Emily were siblings; Miss Blagg had been the family governess. Charles was her husband, Mrs Ingleby was her mother-in-law. The other donors whose names are not prefixed by 'uncle' or 'aunt' were family friends.

Fortunately for Susanna, fashion changed little between 1860 and 1862, so the outfits that had been provided for her married life could continue to be worn in her new role. But before long she needed to extend her wardrobe. Charles Ingleby and his mother socialised very little so Susanna's trousseau did not include much in the way of evening wear. In the spring of 1862, at Etwall Hall, staying with John William and Agnes and Agnes's family, Susanna had twice worn her wedding dress for evening parties. Victorian wedding dresses were not always white, and followed the prevailing fashions. Brides expected to re-use their wedding dresses, either for evening wear, if they were short-sleeved and light coloured, or for daytime 'best'. But Susanna had been violently abused and humiliated by her husband, and her wedding dress must have brought back unhappy memories. She wore it only because she had no alternative evening outfit. On August 26th, 1862, barely a month after she arrived in Armitage, she sought to remedy this omission. She went to the nearby town of Rugeley to be measured for a tulle dress by Mrs Dinsdale, a particularly able local dressmaker, possibly recommended by Susanna's new friend, Mrs Birch. (There were 47 dressmakers/seamstresses/milliners in Rugeley in 1861, serving a population of just over 4,000. In Armitage and the nearby hamlet of Handsacre, with a population of 937 there were nine). The dress arrived on September 11th. It contained 21 yards of tulle at 2s-6d a yard, 46 yards of narrow ribbon at 4d a yard, and 11 yards of wide ribbon at 1s a yard; the bodice was lined with black glaze, and had pads (presumably to enhance the bust) and bones; the whole cost £4-18s-4d of which 10s-6d was the cost of making it up.

Mrs Eliza Dinsdale was rather a special dress maker and it is not clear why - or when - she arrived in Rugeley. At the time of the 1861 census she was at 7, Wolseley Road but in Kelly's 1863 Directory she advertised her business as being at Stafford Road. She was born in Farnborough, Hampshire, but was the wife of a Yorkshireman, John Dinsdale, who described himself to the census enumerator as a '*commercial traveller for a dressmaking establishment employing five assistants*'. That business was almost certainly his wife's. One of the assistants was their niece, 25-year old Laetitia[?] Holbrook, also Farnborough-born, who lived with them, and there was also a live-in apprentice, 16-year old Elizabeth Mary-Anne James from 'Whiteley Rocks', Staffordshire (presumably Wetley Rocks). The other assistants probably lived out. It is possible that Susanna had known the apprentice, Elizabeth James, back home. Wetley Rocks was her uncle's parish and was barely a mile from Ashcombe Park. Before her marriage, both Susanna and her sister Emily Jane, like many philanthropic ladies of their class, used to teach 'work' (meaning sewing) at Cheddleton and Wetley Rocks schools. Had they perhaps taught Mrs Dinsdale's apprentice?

In March 1863, Susanna received news from home of the death of her brother 'poor dear Wettie' - Richard Wettenhall, aged 21. It cannot have been entirely unexpected. Wettenhall had suffered from rheumatoid arthritis since early childhood; he was crippled, weakly, and there are indications that he may have been mentally retarded. A death in the family required the other members to go into mourning, and it was on the women that mourning fell most heavily. Men wore black suits, ties, buttons and watch chains, but even for a wife, a man was only expected to wear mourning for three months. A widow, on the other hand, wore mourning for at least two years, and society looked askance at her if she went back into colours as soon as the obligatory period was expired. Numerous magazines and manuals were published giving advice to the bereaved on the various grades of mourning, and the lengths of time for which it should be worn. The consensus was that a sister should mourn a sibling for six months. For eleven days after the news of Wettenhall's death reached her, Susanna worked at altering the black dresses she already had, then, on the 18th March, she went to Rugeley. *'I went in Mrs Birch's carriage to Rugeley & was measured for my black dress by Mrs Dinsdale, the Birch party paid calls in Colton.'* The black dress would have been trimmed with wide bands of black crepe which could be narrowed after two months and removed altogether after a further four weeks. Mrs Dinsdale's bill survives:-

<i>'To 15 yds of black glace at 5s</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>15</i>	
<i>14yds of muslin for lining skirt</i>			
<i>& crape tucks at 6s-2d¹</i>		<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>4/4 wide patent crape at 7s</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Body lining, braid, bones, buttons etc.</i>		<i>3</i>	
<i>Sleeve lining</i>		<i>2</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Wrist band & jet clasp</i>		<i>3</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>To making Dress</i>		<i>7</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Set of crape sleeves & collar</i>		<i>6</i>	<i>6'</i>

On June 15th Susanna put fresh black crepe on the dress. Crepe was difficult stuff: it spotted, it stained, it flattened out, it turned a rusty colour and as the mourning period progressed it needed to be replaced. By June, Susanna was halfway through the six months for which she had to wear mourning for Wettie, and no doubt the new crepe was of the narrower width. On July 9th she went to see Mrs Dinsdale about a new black dress - the crepe-less one that she was allowed to wear for the fourth and fifth month of the mourning period. For the final month she could, if she chose, go into half mourning - dresses of purple, grey or white trimmed with black. She seems to have been wearing deeper mourning for longer than was strictly recommended. It was important not to be seen to be too anxious to move through the various stages.

In November we find her in mourning again - this time for '*poor Barbara Scott*' - a friend or distant relation for whom she was not obliged to mourn, but whose death Susanna wished to mark in some way. This time, she mended an old black silk dress which she wore for a few days. Such brief periods of mourning recur from time to time. In August 1868, for example, she put '*black in my bonnet for poor Tom Adderley*' - a distant cousin who had recently died.

But being in mourning did not stop Susanna taking an interest in fashion. On 29th April 1863, less than two months after her brother's death, she wrote in her diary '*-- I went with Miss Wilson in the carriage to Rugeley & saw Mrs Dinsdale's & Mrs Bown's fashions.*'

Mrs Bown, (of Ottley and Bown, linen and woollen drapers, Lower Brook Street) advertised in the Staffordshire Advertiser on October 22nd, 1863:-

'OTTLEY and BOWN apprise the Ladies of RUGELEY and its vicinity of their return from the London Market, and that their STOCK comprises the most prevailing NOVELTIES for the present and approaching seasons --'

In December 1863, with the New Year festivities looming (Christmas was celebrated by church attendance and very little else), and out of mourning, Susanna had a white silk dress made in Rugeley. It was fitted on December 21st, and again on 29th, and as an extra, she revamped an old dress - '*December 30th I spent most of the day altering my pink barege dress. Very cold*'

One hopes she wore it to events in well-heated houses, for barege is a fine muslin with a fancy woven stripe, usually overprinted with a pattern. It was often used for summer dresses, though it must have been worn for evening wear in winter too - in November 1864, Susanna was altering another barege dress, this time a black one.

Between 1862 and 1864 Mrs Dinsdale helped Susanna expand her wardrobe for her new and full social life. In May 1863 she provided a headdress for 10s-6d, and in July she altered a pink evening dress, adding 4 yards of tarlatan at 18d, one yard of pink satin at 4s-6d, 1s-4 ½d worth of book muslin, 2 yards of satin ribbon at 1s-8d, plus '*Lace taken & chemise sleeves 2s-6d*'. A brown silk dress (possibly the one Susanna had been given as a wedding gift) was remade in September at a cost of 7s-6d plus 6s-6d worth of material; and a muslin evening dress with black lace cost £1-4s-6d in January 1864.

On 26th April 1864 Susanna and Miss Wilson again went to Rugeley to see Mrs Bown and Mrs Dinsdale's fashions, and the following day they returned to Rugeley to see another dressmaker's - a Mrs Wesson's - fashions. She appears in the directories as a partner in Aughton and Wesson, milliners in Horse Fair. Susanna must have approved, for she bought a mantle from Mrs Wesson. It was not the first time she had patronised her - she had a dress and other things from '*Wesson's*' in October 1863. Wesson and Aughton were a firm of some standing employing at least one assistant. On October 26th 1863, Susanna '*-- walked to Rugeley to have my dress altered by Miss Cook at Mrs Wesson's*'

But in May 1864 she was back at Mrs Dinsdale's buying a hat, and at the end of that month there were more purchases of mourning in Rugeley for her cousin '*poor Clement*' - possibly from Mrs Dinsdale, but no bills survive. Certainly the black silk jacket she ordered on June 10th came from Wesson's. Technically, she only needed to mourn for a cousin for six weeks, and she may well have been back in colours when she went back home to Cheddleton for a holiday in September. By the time she returned to Armitage, however, there had been another death - this time her brother Freddy, a consumptive for some years, had died of what sounds like septicaemia, on October 2nd. Susanna records three weeks and three days spent nursing him, and then, while still at Cheddleton: '*October 3rd Mrs Gwynne came. We chose our black things*'

So this time Susanna's patronage went to a Leek dressmaker. Mourning for Freddy lasted until early April 1865, and later that month Susanna contacted Miss Stevens, a dressmaker in Lichfield. Over the next couple of years she patronised Miss Stevens for her 'best' clothes, bought some items in Rugeley, while visiting Dover tried out a Miss Knight, a dressmaker recommended by John William's sisters-in-law who lived there, and did a fair amount of making and mending herself. Mrs Dinsdale seems to have left Rugeley.

But in 1867, she surfaced again. In July that year Susanna went to London for an operation which she had at 90, Harley Street in what was Florence Nightingale's old hospital, by then a '*Home for Gentlewomen in Time of Sickness*'. Almost her first act after she had checked in was to go to 21 Wigmore Street where Mrs Dinsdale had taken premises. She left a dress to be altered, - very much an act of faith considering the risks inherent in mid-19th century surgery. She also purchased and sent '*the hair*' to her sister Emily. Victorian ladies kept their heads covered most of the time - caps indoors, bonnets and hats out of doors and night caps in bed. It played havoc with their hair. False chignons, fringes, ringlets and hair-pieces were much in demand. Dressmakers seem to have provided a whole

range of beauty treatments. As Susanna recovered, Mrs Dinsdale brought the newly-altered dress, and other items, to 'the Home' to be tried on. Susanna did not pay the bill until July 1868:-

	£	s	d
To Hat finishing, own Feather	1	1	6
To Violet & Black Bonnet	1	6	6
To making up Grenadine evening dress with silk body, Grenadine under skirt & trimmed with bugles [beads]	3	19	6
Lace Tucker etc Compleat [sic] Wreath etc,		10	6
	6	18	0

With respectful thanks & Compts'

Presumably, therefore, at some point between 1864/5 and 1867 Mrs Dinsdale had moved to London.

At the time of the 1871 census 21, Wigmore Street was empty, but Mrs Dinsdale was still working, for on April 19th that year, Susanna received a violet silk dress which she had ordered from her. The bill for it survives and is dated August 1871. The address was then 54 Wigmore Street:-

	£	s	d
To handsewn Violet Poult de Soie ⁸ Morning Dress trimmed with Satin Tunic to match	10	10	-
2 yds of silk at 10/9	1	1	-
Collar & sleeves		10	-
Dress Preservers		1	-
Dress Improver		5	-
White Embroidered petticoat	1	1	-

Dress preservers were under-arm, rubberised pads, to prevent tight-fitting bodices becoming stained by perspiration. In her account book Susanna called them 'guards'. They were a novelty in 1871. A dress improver was a type of half-crinoline or 'crinolette'. It was succeeded by the bustle - a small pad which went at the back and tied on round the waist. Susanna's account book actually describes this 'dress improver' of 1871 as a 'bustle'. Skirts in the 1860s were enormously full and worn over crinoline 'cages' of wire or whalebone. By the early 1870s the shape had changed and the fullness was largely at the back, requiring a differently shaped frame to support them.

The crinolines, dress improvers or bustles were worn over layers of cotton undergarments. First came the chemise, knee-length and shaped like a wide, short-sleeved nightdress, which tucked into drawers,

⁸ 'Poult de soie' was a rich corded silk

open at the crotch and with legs reaching to the calf. Over these went corsets - 'stays' - a petticoat bodice, like a fitted, short-sleeved blouse, and a flannel petticoat. Susanna bought her stays - a pair of 'Eva's stays' cost her 3s-10d in January 1869 - but she made nearly all her other underclothes. A scarlet flannel petticoat took three yards of flannel which cost her 3s-6d on January 17th 1871. Over the frames or pads went more petticoats. The petticoat referred to in Mrs Dinsdale's bill would have been one of these. They usually had tucks or lace or embroidery round the hem, as there was just a chance that the hem might be seen if the day was windy or the wearer moved carelessly.

A stiff little note from Mrs Dinsdale to Susanna survives:-

'54, Wigmore Street

August 17th

Mrs Dinsdale begs respectfully to inform Mrs Ingleby that she does not allow discount, her charges being as close as possible, particularly to those ladies she works for in the Country. The silk dress with parasol sent to Mrs Ingleby would have been either 11 or 12 guineas to any other Lady or any Dress would have been the same taking 16 yards of silk at that price besides satin etc. The two yards sent extra not included'

It is undated. This note is interesting in that it suggests that Mrs Dinsdale supplied various 'ladies in the country'. It would seem that she was running a sort of mail order business - probably using the railway parcels service. Certainly her husband's entry in the 1861 census suggests that even from Rugeley she was supplying more than a purely local clientele. Given the large numbers of women working as dressmakers throughout the country, it is surprising that such a service was needed.

Wigmore Street was a fashionable address, and there were many dressmakers there. In 1880, the Post Office Directory lists 14 workers in the fashionable clothing trades (milliners, dressmakers, cap makers, lace dressers, etc.) on the north side and 30 on the south, out of 106 addresses. This is the only directory in which Mrs Dinsdale's name appears - and then no details of her trade are given.

It is therefore interesting to speculate about how Mrs Dinsdale's clients found her. There are no entries for her in the Post Office Directories at either 21 or 54 Wigmore Street until 1880. She is not listed under 'Commercial' or 'Trade' and the listings by street show that in 1867 (the first year we know she was in London) numbers 19-21 Wigmore Street were tenanted by Benham, ironmongers. By 1871 number 21 was inhabited by Quentin Robert Stubbs, buttermaker, number 54 was empty, but numbers 50 and 52 were lived in by James and John Benham, respectively, with their wives and families². By 1873, number 54 was also part of Benham's, and by 1876 an artist, Henry William Piper, also had rooms there, and by

1879 rooms in number 52 were let to Edward Clifford, another artist. Presumably Benham's showrooms took up the ground floors of the three houses, and the artists had rooms upstairs. Edward Clifford was still there at the time of the 1881 census, and his household consisted of a maid and a manservant. The listing by street, therefore, included tenants. So where was Mrs Dinsdale? The fact that Benham's crossed the street in 1871, the same year that Mrs Dinsdale's billheads show her change of address, suggests that she had some arrangement with them. Why was she not included in the street listings when the Benham's other tenants were? Certainly at the time of the 1881 census her establishment was larger than Edward Clifford's. Was the address merely a *poste restante*? Unlikely, as Susanna was able to visit her there. Was she only an occasional tenant - perhaps spending much of her time travelling and working in people's homes? It is possible, but she never travelled to work for Susanna Ingleby. Even in 1881 when the census returns detail her establishment, she is not mentioned in the Post Office directories. Perhaps the omission was deliberate policy on her part, though it is difficult to see why. Was her practice really so extensive that she did not need to advertise? Her absence from the directories is very curious and calls into question the comprehensiveness of other information gleaned from directories.

We do not know how much Susanna availed herself of Mrs Dinsdale's services for country ladies. Certainly by 1873 when she spent a long spell in London, she again patronised her. On May 14th, 1873, Susanna and John William left Armitage and went to London. John William suffered from what Susanna described as a '*quinsy throat*' and was going to London to consult Dr (later Sir) Morrell Mackenzie, the throat specialist of the day. Dr Mackenzie practised Galvanism, a sort of electric shock therapy which was fashionable at the time. It was painful, expensive, and there is no evidence to suggest it did any good. They stayed in London until the end of June, and John William had 37 treatments. Between August 18th and September 7th they were back in London and he had a further 17.

Susanna treated these visits as holidays and did a good deal of shopping in town. Her clothes buying was again constrained because she was in mourning, this time for her father who had died in February. (Plate 88) Mourning for a parent went on for a year, broken up into four - three months in deep mourning, three months in black with reduced crepe, three months in black and three months in half mourning. Just as she moved into the second phase, reduced the amount of crepe on her dress and felt able to wear jet jewellery, she heard of the death of her estranged husband, the Rev Charles Ingleby. (Plate 89) She immediately paid another visit to Wigmore Street. Susanna's widow's weeds cost considerably more than her wedding dress had done.

'54 Wigmore Street March 1873

Mrs Ingleby

To E Dinsdale

Black silk dress with Tunic & Mantle

high & low Bodies trimmed with Crape

& lined with Silk & trimmed with fringe

14 14

Costume of Poplin de laine³ with Tunic &

Jacket trimmed with Crape & fringe. 5/6

6 6

Two sets of Collars & Cuffs with sleeves

11

To Bonnet & Veil

1 10

Head Dress

10

6

Box

3

6

£23 15'

(Plate 87). Back in January 1860 her wedding dress had cost just five guineas.

In 1874 Susanna, John William and twelve year-old Ralph moved back to Basford Hall. By this date, Susanna was 43 and John William was 52. Neither of them was in the best of health. Perhaps memories of John William's quarrel with his father and of the shameful outcome of Susanna's marriage made them unwelcome in some homes in the area. For whatever reason, their social life declined sharply after their return to Basford.

In April 1876 Susanna visited London to spend a few days with her old friend Fanny Cowell. She bought a sealskin jacket from Barker's of Kensington (£7-17s-6d), a travel bag from Whiteley's (£1-1s-9d) and paid a visit to Mrs Dinsdale. The diary does not tell us what she ordered and no bill survives, but in her account book for January 1877 Susanna records a payment of £5-13s to Mrs Dinsdale for a violet and black silk dress. Susanna had bought 24 yards of violet and black silk at 2s- 4½d a yard from John Adams of Leek the month before she went to London. Violet and black were half-mourning colours. The period of mourning for Charles Ingleby was up in December 1875, and for the last six months of it Susanna could have worn half mourning. Again, she was wearing her weeds for longer than was strictly necessary. This was not unusual. Many women never wore colours again after their husbands died - but given the circumstances of Susanna's marriage, her response seems a little excessive.

This was Susanna's last trip to London, and as far as we can tell, her last contact with Mrs Dinsdale. Mrs Dinsdale continued to work from 54 Wigmore Street. She was there at the time of the 1881 census, by then a widow, and, strangely, claiming in the '*Place of birth*' column that she did not know where she had been born. She admitted to being 58, though twenty years previously she had been 40! Two assistants, Isabella Ayres, aged 23, and Elizabeth Howell, aged 26, lived with her, and so did a sixteen

year old apprentice, Harriet Biggins and a female servant, 21-year old Louisa Hockly. A dress-maker 'visitor', Minnie Alice Pears, aged 26 was also there. By 1882, Hall and Scraggs, a dressmaking firm whose premises had been at 14, Sackville Street in 1881, had taken over 54, Wigmore Street⁹.

In the late 1870's and 1880's Susanna's social life declined even further: she was getting old and ill, and much poorer. John William became deaf and increasingly bitter and reclusive. Her nephew grew up and left school and devoted much time to travel and the collection of 'curiosities' - financed largely by Susanna. Her youngest brother, a clergyman in Oxfordshire, was constantly in trouble - with a pregnant maid servant, an unpaid mortgage, mounting debts, and finally bankruptcy in 1883. Between 1879 and 1883 he '*borrowed*' thousands of pounds from Susanna, and towards the end of her life she wrote in a letter to her solicitor, with some truth, '*I have to watch every penny I spend*'. There was little money left over for new clothes, and few occasions to wear them. Susanna Ingleby died in January 1891, six months short of her sixtieth birthday.

Her patronage of Mrs Dinsdale had lasted for fourteen years and survived two moves on Susanna's part and at least four on Mrs Dinsdale's. But Mrs Dinsdale only provided Susanna's 'best' clothes. We have already seen that she patronised other dressmakers. In fact, her account books and diaries combined refer to fourteen different ones. Some, like Miss Stevens in Lichfield, or Mrs Gibson in Leek seem to have done high quality work. Mrs Gibson's fees for making up a dress were actually higher than most of Mrs Dinsdale's (for example, a black silk dress cost Susanna 11s-6d in March 1883). There was also Mrs Simpson in Leek who charged £1-0s-5d for making up a merino dress in November 1885. All of these people she used on a regular basis.

But there were other ladies whose work she only tried once. Mrs Payne, wife of Alexander Payne the Rugeley draper made her one outfit in 1868 '-- *a muslin dress and slip, finding the muslin and narrow black lace £1-7s-1d & a garibaldi¹⁰ 4s-6d, white mantle 15s, leghorn hat 5s-6d*' (Plate 94) and remade a dress for her a few weeks later for 4s, but was never employed again. Perhaps her work was not up to scratch; her prices were reasonable enough. Others like Miss Knight in Dover and Mrs Gwynne in Leek were used only once because Susanna was away from home when she needed them.

⁹ Post Office Directories for 1881 and 1882

¹⁰ A type of jacket which was supposed to look like Garibaldi's uniform.

However, there were several dressmakers who were employed regularly, whose charges were low and who probably worked on everyday items of clothing. Bessie Conway in Handsacre (a hamlet just outside Armitage) was one such. She was probably the Elizabeth Conway, aged 40, wife of an agricultural labourer and mother of three young children, who appeared in the 1871 census living on Old Road, Handsacre. She did not describe herself to the census enumerator as a dressmaker. Between 1869 and 1870 she did a good deal of work for Susanna, mostly altering dresses, for example:-

*'Sept 13th 1869, altering skirt of violet dress 1s-6d, remaking skirt of pink barege 2s,
-- altering drab dress in the folds 6d, remaking brown dress and altering bodice again
5s'*

As the fashionable dress shape changed in the late '60s, again in the mid '70s and again in the '80s, new dresses had to be bought or old ones remade. Victorian silks were of far higher quality than contemporary fabrics. They were expensive, and their owners expected them to last and survive many alterations and re-makes. It was not only the poor and thrifty who had their clothes altered. In October 1869 Bessie Conway altered a tulle dress (almost certainly the one Mrs Dinsdale had made in 1862) for 1s-3d, and in September 1870 she altered four dresses for 10s.

Susanna acquired her clothes from many places. Some garments were purchased mail-order and ready-made like the grey serge dress from Messrs Spearman & Spearman that cost £2 plus 1s-1d carriage in September 1879. Some she bought second hand, mostly from her impoverished sister Emily - *'1878 March 10th Paisley shawl from Emily £1'*. And many items Susanna made or altered herself. In Armitage in April 1869 she unpicked and remade a blue silk dress. In later years she did much more of her own sewing. She bought large quantities of calico to replenish her stocks of the voluminous cotton underwear then in vogue - as well as to make shirts for her brother and nephew. And in September 1871, as soon as they became readily available, she bought herself a sewing machine from Willcox and Gibbs -for *'£5-15s-6d, box 10s-6d, case 2s'*¹¹. Her friends and neighbours came to see - and borrow - it. On April 3rd, 1872, for example, she wrote in her diary *'-- I lent my sewing machine to Harriet'*¹¹

But despite all these purchases, Susanna's expenditure on clothes averaged less than £14 a year less even than 'Sylvia' recommended.

¹¹ Her friend, Harriet Gillett, of Abbots Bromley

And when that is set against the other information in her personal account books an even more surprising picture is revealed. From her diaries, Susanna appears as a conventional Victorian lady, not particularly well-educated, and whose main preoccupations were her home and her family and whose main recreations were sewing and gardening. She could write and spell, but her vocabulary was limited and her style tedious. But the account books show us what books she bought - religion, history, natural history, biography, philosophy, science, child-care, cookery and household management. She subscribed to The Ladies Treasury, a magazine which, along with language lessons, history, and philosophy, published articles by women whose contribution to science is only now being recognised.

Susanna Ingleby was not totally disinterested in clothes, and she was certainly not eccentric enough to defy the fashionable conventions of her age. But she preferred to spend her money on books for her library and plants for her garden rather than on finery for herself. In another era she might have had a successful career, but that option was not available to her.

1873
54 Wigmore Street March

Mrs Ingleby

To E Dinsdale


Black Silk Dress with Lingerie			
& Shoulder high & low Boels			
trimmed with Crêpe & lined			
with silk & trimmed with fringe	14	14	
Costume of Poplin de laine with			
Lingerie & Jacket Trimmed with			
Crêpe & fringe	5/6	6	6
Two sets of Collars & Cuffs with laces		11	
Go Bonnet & Veil	1	10	
Head Dress		10	6
		3	6
		<hr/>	
		£ 23	15
		<hr/>	
			

Plate 89. Bill from Mrs Dinsdale, 54 Wigmore Street, to Mrs Susanna Ingleby of Abbot's Bromley, for widow's mourning. It was ordered in June 1873 and paid for in July. See p.369.



Plate 90. Susanna Ingleby photographed by Elliot and Fry, 55, Baker Street, London, on June 4th, 1873. A matching photograph was taken of her brother, John William. They cost a guinea for eighteen copies.

Susanna was wearing mourning for her father who had died in February. She is wearing second stage mourning, with less crepe than she would have worn for the first three months of the mourning period, and some jewellery. Mrs Dinsdale had made the dress for her in response to a letter sent on February 21st. The dress arrived at Abbots Bromley, where Mrs Ingleby then lived, on March 1st. It cost £3-15s and Susanna Ingleby paid for it on July 8th.



Plate 91

Mrs Susanna Ingleby with her brother, John William Sneyd and nephew, Ralph De Tunstall Sneyd, photographed by W.J.Lapworth of Stafford on August 21st, 1868.

The dress she is wearing is almost certainly the one made for her by Mrs Payne of Rugeley earlier that year, of white muslin, trimmed with black lace, for £1-7s-1d, with a matching garibaldi which cost 4s-6d. Her brother was an officer in the Staffordshire Yeomanry, and wears his uniform. Her nephew, six year old 'Ralphy', wears a kilt, given to him by his Uncle Dryden.

Appendix two

The Personal Account Books of Eliza Spurrett, nee Stone (1813-35), Lady Langham (1845-54) and Anna Morrell (1851-72)

Eliza Spurrett

Leicester Record Office contains a collection of diaries kept between 1813 and 1885 by Mrs Eliza Spurrett. She was born Eliza Stone in 1797 and her first diary dates from the year she was sixteen. That diary, and subsequent ones up to 1835, contain details of her personal expenditure. In 1836 she switched to a different diary format, and unfortunately the later ones contain no financial accounts¹.

Eliza was the daughter of a gentleman, though it is quite difficult to ascertain precisely what her social position was. Her grandfather, Joseph Chamberlain, was a wealthy Leicester stockinger, but her father was a younger son and inherited only a few thousand pounds. He had the tenancy of a farm at Knighton that belonged to Sir Edward Hartopp. He also valued land and collected rents for various noblemen and gentlemen, including the Duke of Rutland at Belvoir and Lord Lanesborough at Swithland. Eliza was one of nine children, and in 1804 was sent to school at Mansfield with her three elder sisters. She returned home when she was ten and continued her education with a series of French, arithmetic and drawing masters who came out from Leicester, but she and her sisters also did work that sounds quite menial.

*'We used to plait straw and have it made up for our hats. It was sold in bundles ready for splitting and plaiting. It was nice work, and pillow lace I liked making, but I did not like spinning so well --- My mother used to employ three or four women in the winter to spin Flax and in the Spring a Weaver from Wigston made it into linen for sheets etc ---'*²

It sounds as though the Stone girls were being brought up able to earn their livings if the need arose - though perhaps most gentleman farmer's daughters were expected to have such skills. Later, in her diaries, Eliza would record that she had money from her mother '*per lavora*' - by which she seems to have meant 'for work'³.

¹ Leics RO, 7054/1-2

² Reminiscences of Eliza Spurrett, Leics RO, (undated) p. 10

³ Presumably she mistook '*lavora*' for '*labore*' - or did she mean '*washing*'?

She married in 1829, a year later than intended, as her father died in 1828 and the wedding was postponed. *'I was married in a Silk Dress and Bonnet to match, in a half-mourning colour'*⁴. It is not clear what her husband's profession was, but he seems to have been a businessman of some sort. Her first child was stillborn - in 1831 - but she went on to have two sons (one of whom died in infancy) and four daughters. They lived in Leicester until 1842, then moved to Banbury, then to Bath and then back to Leicester. Mr Spurrett died in 1854, but Eliza lived on to the grand old age of 88, dying in 1885.

In her memoirs she described how she had dressed as a girl -

*'We girls always wore coloured prints in the morning and put on white when we dressed for the 3 o'clock dinner. Short sleeves were sometimes worn with the morning dress, but more frequently long sleeves. A "Spencer" was put on for going out. Waists were very short and skirts were short too, so as to shew the sandal which crossed the instep and was then brought round and tied in a bow. We varied our white dresses by having different coloured ribbons, sometimes sashes, sometimes braces, and in other fanciful ways.'*⁵

It was dresses like these that sixteen year old Eliza recorded buying in 1813 in her first diary. She was then receiving a quarterly 'allowance' of £1-15s plus £2-2s 'cash', and at the same time her parents usually made her a present of a few shillings, so she had roughly £16 a year to spend. She often overspent. Most of it went on clothes, though a little went on church collections, charitable donations, presents and card playing. Eliza's family were generous. Back in 1748 young Kitty and Betty Jervis of Meaford Hall - daughters of a much more aristocratic family - got a dress allowance of just £14-14s each a year⁶.

In 1813 Eliza bought a pelisse for £4; 10s-3d of white muslin for a frock, 8s worth of 'batella' for a frock and two - presumably ready-made - batella frocks at 10s-6d and 10s-4d, a batella 'gown' for 11s-11d, a leno frock for 9s and a red frock for 17s; 1s-11½d worth of batella for a spencer; 2s-6d worth of yellow ribband and sarsnet for a 'body'; eleven pairs of gloves of various lengths and colours; a pair of boots for 12s and some coloured boots for 8s-6d, and 6 pairs of shoes - including pairs in white satin, black kid, sealskin and lemon kid. No payments were recorded to dressmakers, so presumably young Eliza, made her own clothes at this stage in her life. She also bought 4 chemises for £1-1s and 9s-6d worth of calico for two night gowns, a parasol for £1-1s, a pink handkerchief for 3s, a green veil for 3s-3d, a white

⁴ Op cit, Spurrett (undated) p.13

⁵ Ibid, p. 4

⁶ Op cit, Hayden, Costume 22 (1998)

necklace for 6s, a petticoat for 6s-1½d and bonnets for 10s and 10s-7d. She bought a toothbrush, a tooth comb, had her hair cut each month, had her boots, shoes, stays and a brooch mended, had feathers curled, silk stockings re-footed and a petticoat glazed. The rest of her expenditure went on trimmings - ribbons, sashes, shoe bows, flowers, collars, handkerchiefs and the like. Sometimes she mentions what the trimming was for, so we learn that she already had in her wardrobe a grey dress, a pink frock, a green frock and at least two bonnets. Her total expenditure in 1813 was £21-5s-9d (more than her recorded income, so perhaps she had some savings) of which all but £2-0s-3d was spent on dress or related items. Young Eliza was on the brink of adulthood and was replacing the clothes of her childhood.

The next diary to survive dates from 1817, and by then Eliza was twenty, and slightly less extravagant. The rest of her expenditure is recorded in table form for simplicity's sake. The diary for 1822 is missing.

Eliza Spurrett's expenditure on dress

	1817	1818	1819	1820	1821	1823	1824	1825	1826	1827	1828
Dresses 4	3	3	2	1	5	4	5		5	1	
Bonnets/hats	1	1	1			1	2	1	3	2	1
Shoes/boots	4	5	5	3	1	1	3	1	6	3	6
Gloves	1	4	4	6	2	4	1	2	5	2	2
Stays	1	1	1		1	1		1	1		
Night/under-wear	5	11	5	2	5	7	2	11		8	
Scarves etc		2			1	3	1		1		
Cloaks/pelisses				1				1			
Bodies	4	1	1	1		1		3	2		1
Skirts				1							1

	1829	1830	1831	1832	1833	1834	1835
Dresses		1		1	1	2	
Bonnets/hats	1	1	1			1	1
Shoes/boots	4	3	3	8	2	1	2
Gloves			4		1		1
Stays		1	1				
Night/under wear	2	4			2		1
Scarves etc	1			1		1	
Cloaks/pelisses		1	1				
Bodies		1					

She was still spending most of her money on ribbons and trimmings to revamp her existing wardrobe.

Eliza Spurrett's expenditure

	Total personal expenditure			Expenditure on dress		
	£	s	d	£	s	d
1817	12	4	1 ½	11	17	1 ½
1818	10	6	9	10	1	6
1819	15	15	3 ½	14	17	3 ½
1820	11	11	2 ½	11	4	11 ½
1821	12	18	11 ½	12	1	9 ½
1823	23	9	3 ½	22	16	6 ½
1824	18	7	7	17	11	1
1825	19	15	5	19	2	10
1826	11	11	2	10	12	2
1827	19	6	8	18	14	8
1828	9	1	2	8	12	7
1829	10	13	6	10	6	6
1830	6	4	8	5	19	2
1831	22	19	5	22	15	11
1832	12	11	2	12	8	2
1833	6	3	8 ½	6	3	8 ½
1834	7	8	8	7	8	8
1835	18	17	10 ½	18	17	10 ½

By 1820, Eliza was patronising dressmakers and milliners rather than making all her clothes herself - Mrs Pegg (who advertised in the Leicester papers and had premises in Southgates) and Jackson's were the first firms she went to. In 1821 she patronised a Mrs Hitchcock and settled on Holmes as her shoemaker. In 1823 Mrs Bracey was making her stays, and, though she was still going to Mrs Pegg, Miss Pochin also made some of her dresses. In 1830 she began to go to Miss Webb for bonnets and caps, and by the following year she was buying drapery and millinery from both Jackson's and Cooper's.

She was married by this point and her first child was born in 1831, so her accounts begin to show expenditure on baby clothes - in 1831 at least £3-5s was spent on things for her baby. Sadly, the child was stillborn, but in 1832 she became pregnant again and began to build up her stock of babywear. She also bought an India rubber apron - presumably to wear while bathing the baby - for 6s. She began to patronise another dressmaker - Miss Goddard - who came to the house, and who charged just 3s for two day's work. Eliza now bought caps for herself - and possibly also for the child - from Mrs Thornton. In 1833 she paid her 19s. She seems to have been pregnant again in 1834 for the accounts include a lot of children's wear - including a dozen size 3 cotton socks and another waterproof apron - from Baines - for 6s. That year Miss Clayton replaced Miss Goddard as the family's home dressmaker. In 1835 she was employed for three days making mourning - probably for the little boy who died in infancy - at 3s-9d, and the same year she was paid an unspecified amount for *'making children's things at 9 different times'*.

The picture of Eliza's wardrobe in later years is somewhat distorted, as she then simply paid a lump sum to Mrs Pegg or Miss Pochin without itemising what they did. Her 1830 accounts also contain a cryptic reference against one of these entries '*See book*' which may mean she kept another account book for accounts with firms that were not to be paid immediately. If so, our picture of her expenditure on dress after she was married is incomplete - and certainly she spent very little in the 1830s considering she was also clothing a young family.

Lady Langham

Lady Langham's clothing account book for 1845 to 1854 is in Northampton Record Office⁷. She was the sister of the politician, Sir Francis Burdett, and the wife of Sir James Langham of Cottesbrooke in Northamptonshire and Langham House in Middlesex, 10th baronet. She had married in 1800 at the age of 22, and by the time her account book begins she was 67 and a grandmother. She gave birth to eleven children and by 1845 had buried six of them. Lady Elizabeth Langham died in 1855, the year after her account book ends, so it gives us a picture of her expenditure on clothes at the very end of her life. Even then, she was spending a lot of money. It would be interesting to know how much she spent when she was in her prime.

Her accounts are not very detailed, and tend to consist of entries like '*Milliner's Bill 10s-8d*' '*Bills for Caps £1-6s-6d*' or '*Hairdresser 17s-0d*', so it is difficult to reconstruct her wardrobe, but the book does give a picture of her total expenditure. Her clothes were expensive - in June 1845 she paid £3-3s-6d for a silk dress and in May 1846 she spent £11-18s-6d on mourning. A muslin dress bought in August 1846 cost her £1-17s-6d and a white bonnet was £2-2s in April 1847. She bought jewellery, and in June 1851 paid £1-2s for repairing rings. Nonetheless, she still had her stays mended and her bonnets cleaned. Most of her entries are simply '*Dressmaker*' or '*Shoe Bill*' but she does mention some of the people she patronised by name. Someone called Powell was described as both a mantua maker and a milliner - though by the 1850s Lady Langham had given up using the old fashioned term 'mantua maker'. She also bought millinery from Seaton's. In 1850, unusually, she paid 5s to a '*Sempstress*' - perhaps, like the good Mrs Danvers in Lettice Arnold, to cut out the middle man, or perhaps simply for running repairs that no-one in her household was able to do. The account book is meticulously kept and beautifully legible and the totals for each page and each year are carefully calculated. The results appear below.

⁷ Northants RO L(C)505

Lady Langham's total annual expenditure on dress

	£	s	d
1845	40	12	6
1846	63	16	11 ½
1847	60	9	11 ½
1848	47	10	4 ½
1849	41	12	2 ½
1850	41	0	5
1851	51	14	6
1852	63	5	5
1853	63	7	8 ½
1854	51	11	2 ½

Lady Langham had no need of the services of 'Sylvia'. Money was not a problem - in 1990s terms she spent the equivalent of £3,200 on dress in 1846 alone.

Anna Morrell

Anna Morrell, nee Wilson, was born in 1794, the daughter of the Rev Robert Wilson, second master at Newcastle Grammar School, and granddaughter of John Bowes, surgeon, of Bedale. She married Robert Morrell (1799-1866), who was manager of the Selby branch of the York City and County Bank. They had six children, including twins who died in infancy and a daughter who died of measles at the age of nine in 1844. Of their three surviving children, one son, Robert Wilson Morrell, was apprenticed to a Bradford woollen merchant, and the other, William Wilberforce Morrell, followed his father into the bank. The daughter, Jemima (1832-1909) eventually married and produced children, but in 1863, at the age of 31 and still single, she went on one of Thomas Cook's first continental tours and published her diary of the trip Miss Jemima's Swiss Journal⁸. They were, it would seem, a solid, respectable, professional, middle class family with no great fortune or important connections.

Anna Morrell's surviving account book is now in York Record Office⁹. It dates from 1851 to 1872, so at the time she was writing it she, like Elizabeth Langham, was a mature woman with adult children and young grandchildren. The last entries are for October 1872, a few months before her death in her 79th year. Mrs Morrell's account book is carefully kept, with her expenditure entered by day and month, and each item individually priced. At the end of some years, she analysed her expenditure into one of several main categories and added up how much she had spent under each head, and how much she had spent in total. These analyses are reproduced below, together with annual totals of her personal expenditure.

⁸ N.Yorks RO schedule relating to 69/3/15

⁹ Ibid 69/3/15

Both her age and her social position would lead us to suppose that Mrs Morrell would not spend a great deal of her money on clothes, and we would be right.

Anna Morrell's personal expenditure							
Year	Draper	Bonnets	Travelling	Shoes	Caps	Sundries	Total
1851	£10-7-4½	£2-11-4	£1-12-6	£1-8-6	£1-7-3½	£2-7-8	£19-14s-8d
Year	Draper	Presents/subs	Plants	Shoes	Caps	Sundries	Total
1852	£11-1-3	£7-8-6	18s-6	£1-0-6	18s-5	£1-11-7	£22-18s-9d
Total							
			1853	£23-1-3			
			1854	£17-13-7			
			1855	£3-16-12			
			1856	£22-16-11			
			1857	£18-15-9			
			1858	£12-17-4 ½			
			1859	£24-14-7			
			1860	£27-6-11			
			1861	£30-15-2			
			1862	£20-18-4			
			1864	£22-9-6			
			1865	£13-13			
			1866	£36-13-11 - this included 'mourning for my dear husband £16-13-11'			
			1867	£31-13-5 - plus another 18s-5d for mourning to R Yates			

After Mr Morrell's death, Anna's expenditure increased markedly and she began to produce annual analyses again. These are lengthier than before and so are tabulated differently.

Anna Morrell's personal expenditure as a widow					
	1868	1869	1870	1871	1872
	£ s d	£ s d	£ s d	£ s d	£ s d
Draper viz Crape	11- 5 -10	----	----	----	----
Dressmaker	2- 5 - 9	9-18- 3	----	----	----
Caps	1-17- 1	----	1-11-10	1-15- 3	1-11- 7
Draper	10-18- 7	13-14-11	15- 6 - 3	16-11- 3	18- 7- 1
Presents	13-12- 7	14-11-10	9- 0-10	33- 6 - 5	9-13- 1
Charity	8- 0 - 5	10- 1- 6	49- 3 - 1	25- 0- 8	48- 5- 9
Jewellery	4- 6 - 1	----	2-16- 0	----	----
Shoes	16-10	15- 0	16- 4	15- 3	1- 0- 0
Travelling	1-13- 3	2- 1	11-17- 2	13-16- 5	13- 0- 0
Postage	7- 0	1- 0	10-10	12- 2	13- 0
Sundries	2-9-11	2- 4-11	3- 2- 2	2-18- 1	2-18- 8
Books	16- 6	6- 6	3-11- 0	1-17- 1	1- 5- 4
Medicine	7- 9	4-17- 6	5-13- 6	2-17- 5	4- 2- 6
Mrs Freer	19- 2	----	----	----	----

Additional expenditure on the home

	1868	1869	1870	1871	1872
Garden	£13-19-9	£9-17-5	£12-10-0	£10- 8- 2	£15-0-11
Furniture	----	----	£ 6- 5- 8	£ 2-11-5	£ 3-6- 8
Greenhouse furniture	----	----	£15- 0- 0	---	---

Anna Morrell was frugal. She appears to have had one or two new dresses each year, and the cost of making them was between 1s-6d and 5s. She seems to have made two or three major shopping trips a year, on which she bought ready made goods, fabric and haberdashery, and ordered a dress to be made. Payment for making is recorded alongside other purchases, so it looks as if she had them made up through whichever draper's she patronised. Perhaps she paid in advance or perhaps she wrote up her accounts later. For example, on April 4th 1854 she bought a veil (8s-6d), gloves (2s) a bonnet (14s-6d) five caps (ranging in price from 1s-6d to 6s) two petticoats (3s and 3s-1½d) a pair of stays (11s-6d) and various fabrics including 12s-4½d worth of barege and paid 1s-8d to a 'dressmaker'. She went on a similar shopping expedition again that August. She gave presents to her children - in August 1855, on shopping excursion day, she gave Jemima 10s 'she being in a bankrupt state', and in October she spent 3s-6d on a 'Frock for Grandchild'. She bought quite a lot of children's clothes - presumably for her other grandchildren. Mrs Morrell had false teeth - she had them mended for 6s in August 1859 and had a new lower set the following March at the extortionate price of £7.

Caps were a major part of her expenditure - in her itemised accounts they had a section all to themselves. She was not unusual - in Cranford, Mrs Gaskell describes how other ladies of limited means dressed.

*'The expenditure on dress in Cranford was principally in that one article referred to. If the heads were buried in smart new caps, the ladies were like ostriches, and cared not what became of their bodies. Old gowns, white and venerable collars, any number of brooches --- the ladies of Cranford always dressed with chaste elegance and propriety --'*¹⁰

Mrs Morrell seldom mentions names of the firms she patronised, but in 1851 she mentions the payment of 5s being to 'Miss Briggs'. She had some of her caps made by a Miss Rawson, and also paid bills to a Miss Bairstow, and on May 3rd 1867 she paid 'Miss Bairstow at her show 5s-6d'. She also patronised a Miss Routledge on a regular basis, and in November 1868 she paid her 13s-6d for making bed hangings. She had a mourning gown trimming Miss Batty in December 1867, but the bulk of her mourning, and much of her other haberdashery came from the delightfully named Mr Twist's. She bought most of her widow's caps from Tomkinson's. Mrs Freer - who appears in the summary of expenditure for 1868, receiving 19s-

¹⁰ Op cit, Gaskell, (1891 edition) pp.134 -5

2d - was a seamstress and made sleeves and collars, and the like. In October 1871 she was paid a paltry 1s-6d for making a nightgown.

Perhaps Mr Morrell had been miserly. After his death, Anna's expenditure increased markedly. She bought furniture for her home, and plants and glass and chairs for her garden. She gave presents to family and friends and also contributed generously to charity - she was a Wesleyan and most of her charities seem to have been chapel based. She did not, however, spend much more on dress.

Conclusion

Dressmakers were affected by the prevailing economic climate, but they were also affected by the economic micro-climates that were their client's lives. Ageing customers might be happy to continue to patronise the person who had served them for many years, but their patronage was likely to become less and less valuable. Women whose husbands' fortunes declined would also reduce their expenditure on dress. Several strategies were open to them; they might cease buying clothes altogether for a few years, they might patronise a cheaper dressmaker, they might simply have alterations done to bring their existing wardrobe up to date, they might do their own alterations or make their own new clothes¹¹. By the 1870s ready-to-wear clothes were increasingly available and respectable, and competed with dressmakers' trade. Businesses had constantly to recruit new clients to keep up the flow of profitable work. Women working for themselves must have been particularly vulnerable to the vicissitudes of their clients' lifestyles. Much more work needs to be done on such relationships. There must be many sets of accounts lurking in record offices up and down the country that would repay detailed study and might clarify some of these issues, but shortage of space confined this study to four¹².

What emerges from the above studies is the amount of money spent on remaking, on trimmings to re-vamp existing garments and the disproportionate expenditure on caps and bonnets. By comparison, quite small sums were spent on new dresses. It is also interesting to note that the fashion pundits of the day got it wrong. Of our sample, three spent, on average, less than the most frugal reader of 'Sylvia' or Mrs Praga was advised was essential¹³. Small wonder that dressmaking was an impoverished profession.

¹¹ However, the greatest part of the cost of a new dress was the fabric, not the making, so home dressmaking would not have solved many problems for the newly impoverished.

¹² In appendices one and two

¹³ See Chapter six 'Fashion writers'

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